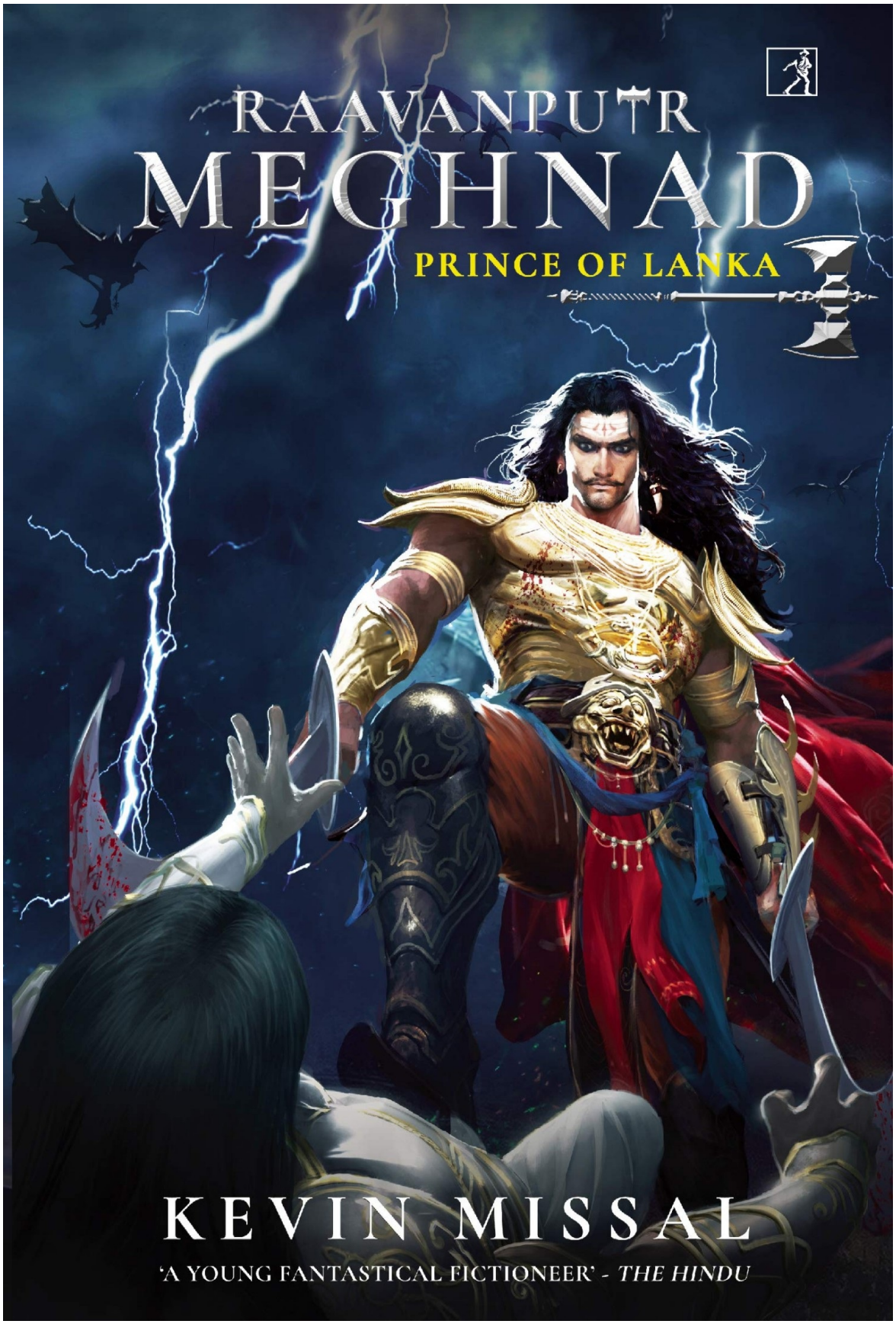
RAAVANPUTR
MEGHNAD
PRINCE OF LANKA
KEVIN MISSAL
'A YOUNG FANTASTICAL FICTIONEER' - THE HINDU


RAAVANPUTR
MEGHNAD
PRINCE OF LANKA
KEVIN MISSAL
'A YOUNG FANTASTICAL FICTIONEER' - THE HINDU

RAAVANPUTR MEGHNAD

Kevin Missal

SIMON &
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

To the Reader

Before you begin reading, I want you to keep in mind a few disclaimers. This is not a book based on the Ramayana. There are a lot of characters from the Ramayana that I have not included since they were not required for the narrative that I was constructing. My focus and story arc in this book have been purely from the point of view of Raavanputr Meghnad.

Also, some scenes and situations have been imagined and reconstructed and is not completely faithful to the original historical source, in order to fit the needs of Ravanputr Meghnad's story.

Thank you so much for reading this. You may turn the page now.

PROLOGUE

Laxman

It was the seventh month of the war …

Laxman knew death now.

He had been close to it because of one man: Meghnad.

But not today. The son of the mighty Raavan hadn't shown his face today and Laxman was glad. He almost felt lucky.

Let's hope I stay lucky.

As he plunged the sword deep into the gut of the Rakshas beneath his feet, Laxman scanned his surroundings for Raghav — his brother, the Avatar of Vishnu. He was nowhere to be seen. The war had turned messy, the darkred soil buried deep in the confines of the fiery desert where the orange sun flared its scarlet rays.

The stench of the piled corpses infiltrated the air, with the sound of the clashing of blades and the crushing of bones reverberating in Laxman's ears.

He felt weak. His scars throbbed.

But he had not given up.

We are close to winning today.

Laxman felt someone grabbing him from behind — massive arms holding him tightly, squeezing his lungs out. He could almost feel his breath quaver.

He was fainting.

Come on!

He tried to writhe out of the grip that imprisoned him. But the more he tried, the weaker he felt.

His blade had toppled from his hands and the heavy set of arms was now making matters worse for his body.

He turned his head a little to face the dark-skinned Rakshas, the man responsible for his breathlessness.

Damn you!

With all his might, he pushed himself back, rooting his right foot on the ground and then struggled more, desperately trying to lean towards one of the fallen daggers, but his efforts went in vain. He called out to his Vanar soldiers but they were busy fighting their own battles. And before he could do anything more …

He heard it.

The trumpets blared and the sound of the heavy set of wheels entered the battleground.

No.

Everyone's eyes, including his, turned towards the chariot upon which a bulky, muscular man stood his ground. The Vanars squeaked in fear. The Rakshasas applauded and roared.

And he knew why.

It was none other than …

Indrajit, also known as Meghnad — the unparalleled warrior in this war.

Guess I wasn't that lucky today. I should have killed him when I had the chance.

He was tall and he had a black breastplate over which a shining orb gleamed. He wore a *tilak* on his forehead with a red *bindi* which was similar to the marks on the foreheads of those who worshipped Lord Shiva. His skin was as dark as charcoal, while he sported a thick bushy mustache.

He had two swords — one dangling from his hip and another latched on to his back, sheathed in a scabbard of pigskin.

'My prince!' cried the Rakshas who was holding on to Laxman. 'Kill him.'

Laxman tried to push himself away from the Rakshas but failed. He frantically searched for someone on his side in the crowd, hoping *someone* would come to his rescue.

But there were none.

Meghnad came forward as his army continued to fight the Vanars, his hulking presence towering over the frozen figure of Laxman. Laxman saw the subtle features of the Raavanputr — his light grey eyes highlighted with a scar across his left eye brow.

'Kill him, my prince!' The Rakshas sneered again.

Laxman would have used his charms, but not today. Indrajit earned his reputation not by being fooled, but by being decisive in his actions.

And this quality of his was evident when he pulled out his sword and swung it in Laxman's direction …

Laxman closed his eyes, as fear choked him, his heartbeat rose. And for a moment, he wanted to feel pain, but couldn't. Perplexed, he opened his eyes and

he felt the Rakshas's grip loosening as the sword wavered while stuck in his head, blood spurting as it fell down, flat on the floor.

The Rakshas was killed by his own prince, Meghnad — the vanquisher of Indra, the conqueror of Amravati. He was the wielder of several atomic weapons and invincible to the point where his involvement meant the victory of Raavan, his father.

But his action spoke otherwise.

What was more surprising to Laxman was that the very man who had been trying to kill him for so many days had just saved him.

'Why would you do this?'

And how are you alive after the incident at Nikumbila Hills?

Meghnad displayed no emotion. He was impassive; as if killing his own kind didn't affect him. Laxman remained confused until he saw what Meghnad was doing.

He was kneeling down. And then he pulled out his sword, presenting it to Laxman, as if he was surrendering.

And then to Laxman's sheer surprise he uttered the words — 'Kill me.'

450 days before the war …

1. Meghnad

When he entered, the crowd ceased to speak.

His feet hit the granite floor of the grandiose Indrasabha — the open courthouse of the Devas. The structure of the entire place was semicircular. One half of the area was occupied by the civilians — Gandharvs, the servants of the Devas; Apsaras, the beautiful women, and the Manav immigrants that had escaped the ills of Illavarti — to be here at the heart of Swarglok — Amravati Kingdom. And the other half was where the high fifteen feet pillars over which the King and the Queen of the Devas sat. Swarg, as people thought, wasn't the heavens but a huge island, situated miles away from Illavarti.

This age's Indra, Rocana, was there, leaning forward, his silver hair dancing over the sides of his face. His overalls were white and he had a pale demeanour. He was clean-shaven and his posture was heroic.

But to Meghnad he resembled a puny girl, with flowing locks of hair.

His wife, Sachi, was short, with beady eyes, not the kind you would expect to be a queen. In fact, she looked like any ordinary woman.

How boring!

Meghnad expected the queen of the Devas to look … angelic. But alas!

The guards pushed Meghnad to the front where he could be under the striking, pellucid light filtering through the mosaic from above. He narrowed his gaze, grinning, as he saw Rocana studying him.

'My lord, I'm flattered. But frankly, I would prefer to speak to a woman,' Meghnad said, shrugging as the chains that bound him crackled.

The guard next to Meghnad said, 'We saw him trespassing.'

Rocana shook his head. 'You are the son of Dashanan, aren't you?' This Indra was young. Meghnad had heard how the Indras lived for two hundred to three hundred years solely because of their consumption of Soma drinks that came from the Somalata plants which they brewed here in Swarglok. Years ago, they brewed it in Illavarti as well. The Somas had anti-ageing qualities and gave immense strength and power in its full capacity, though they could harm a weak-minded person's brain, making them go mad.

‘Guilty,’ he smiled.

‘Your father has been displayed in chains outside in the street for the people to laugh at him. But instead of an army to save him, you come here … alone?’ Rocana laughed.

Meghnad felt anger boiling up because of the treatment of his father, but he didn’t show it. He had to remain composed and relaxed. Meghnad had seen his father outside — naked and unconscious, tied to a long metal pole. His heart sank.

They were disrespecting him and our empire.

But it was, after all, his father’s fault.

His motive was simple — to go to Amravati and steal the Chintamani Stones, combustible ingredients needed to create an atomic weapon which they could use against Ayodhya and the other unconquerable states of Illavarti allied with the enemy state. Meghnad had planned a smart way to do it, but no! His father wanted to attack directly, for he was impulsive, arrogant and because of that … he had left the pride of his empire on the streets of Amravati.

‘Erm … yeah,’ Meghnad nodded.

Rocana laughed loudly and so did Sachi. The crowd followed them, while Meghnad remained calm.

‘So didn’t you have any other plan? A better one?’

‘You know,’ Meghnad drifted from the topic. ‘The previous Indra I had read about was pretty boring and fastidious. You seem like my kind of a person.’

‘The earlier Indras were weak! But look at us now — we have in our grasp the very man who has been terrorizing the land of Illavarti, the conqueror of many of its states. We were going to capture you nonetheless by organizing a campaign towards Lanka. But your father had to come right here before even we did anything. It was like a gift in the horse’s mouth,’ Rocana rasped as the crowd cheered for the Indra, who thumped his chest in delight.

Meghnad listened to all of it, composed, as he recalled his academic days when he was taught the history of Amravati and its different Indras. Everyone thought it was only one, but there were many. It was a title passed down from one Deva king to the other.

It began with Devendra, who was alive during Hiranyakashyap’s time and then there was Satyajit who belonged to the time of Mahabali and was instrumental in making Soma Stones available across Illavarti to aid the Manavs and the Tribals in using it for their medicinal properties before he ventured back to Swarg with his army, and the Manavs who wanted to follow him. The Soma Stones were not open to public before Satyajit, but were provided in scarce quantities by the Devas to a few people. But Satyajit made it possible for

everyone to have it, although most of its locations were hidden.

‘Indeed, indeed,’ Meghnad whistled, with a bored expression on his face.

Rocana smiled as he ordered his guards, ‘Take him and hang him out for the crows, right next to his father …’

‘Might I say you have a very pretty wife?’ Meghnad said as his arms were grabbed by the royal guards. ‘I mean look at those pair of breasts! Who wouldn’t want to fondle them?’

Rocana flared his nostrils and the crowd went silent. ‘How dare you?’ He stood up, ordering his men. ‘KILL HIM! CHOP HIS HEAD OFF IN FRONT OF ME!’

The blades were pulled out instantly and brought close to his throat.

Meghnad chuckled in return.

‘STOP!’ The Third Indra roared, ‘Why are you laughing, demon?’

Meghnad pulled up his brow. ‘Well, you asked me if I had any other plan.’ Grinning, he continued, ‘As a matter of fact, I do!’

Meghnad spat a small ball from his mouth that he had been hiding under his tongue, right on the ground. The ball emitted a huge layer of red smoke. As he saw the guards getting confused around him, then coughing, he closed his eyes, concentrating on the pin that he had been hiding under his coat sleeve all this while, which he pulled out, sticking it into the locks of his chains, opening them. He opened his eyes in the next instant, and made a run for it, as the smoke began to dissipate.

But instead of running towards his father and saving him, he went the opposite way.

I must locate the Chintamani Stones.

2. Suparnika

I hope it’s him.

Seeing the hermit’s home that was personally reported to her by her spies, Meenakshi knew she was at the right place.

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ asked Kumbini, her handmaiden, whose head was shaped like an egg, her teeth on full display as she kept chewing on a corncob.

They were inside the purple-coloured, linen-laced caravan which was carried by their army, the very army that was funded by Dashanan, Meenakshi’s brother.

‘If it’s true what they really saw, that means we have a winner, my dear,’ Meenakshi smiled, scratching the tip of her cheek with her long, sharp nails. She was popular for those nails and was in fact called Suparnika, back in Lanka.

‘Your actions are always mysterious,’ Kumbini shook her head. ‘I hope you know what you are doing.’

The image of her husband Vidhyut flashed in front of Meenakshi’s eyes and then she closed them, fighting back her tears. ‘Of course, I know. I lost him because of them and I shall not give up until I have their heads.’

She came out of the caravan which had halted, a few yards away from the hermit’s home. And she began to walk, but not before ordering Kumbini to stay away.

She had to see it herself.

She had to see *him* with her own eyes.

The spies could be chewing up lies, for all she knew. But her eyes wouldn’t lie.

As she came close to the vicinity of the hut, with her Rakshas soldiers behind her, she saw three people: One was a woman, quite pretty and young, dusky, she was sword-fighting with a boy, who had free-flowing, shoulder-length hair and wore a white dhoti. There was a second boy with matted hair, cooking food, over a pair of burnt logs.

Meenakshi made her presence known, coughing as she entered this scene. The three of them froze.

‘I apologise for intruding, my friends.’ Meenakshi smiled.

The boy with matted hair came forward, pushing back the woman in a protective stance. He had a long saffron shawl covering his chest.

‘Yes?’

‘I am Queen Meenakshi from Janasthan,’ Meenakshi pointed towards the far end of the Panchavati forests where the long, striking black towers visibly struck out under the setting sun. ‘And I was returning from a hunt when I happened to see such a lovely bunch of people here.’

‘Is there a problem?’ the boy asked meekly.

‘I hope not. I hope you realize that Panchavati, where you and your friends are, is under the jurisdiction of Danda Kingdom — *my* kingdom.’

He with the matted hair clenched his jaw. ‘Dashanan’s kingdom, you mean?’

‘It’s the same thing, my dear. He conquers and then puts his siblings in charge, like he has put me.’ Meenakshi laughed. ‘Let’s talk inside.’ And she began to walk when he lifted his hand.

‘No.’

‘No?’ She arched her brows. ‘You refuse the queen? Haven’t you realized who owns the land you stand upon?’

At that moment, the boy swallowed a lump. ‘I mean … I’m sorry … I meant to say we can talk here while my friends go inside. Only us.’

Meenakshi saw a sliver of jealousy sweep past the girl’s face. And she had red *sindoor* applied on her forehead, crossing over her chestnut hair. *He’s her husband.*

‘All right.’

The boy ordered the open-haired boy, ‘Lakhan! Take her inside.’ And he swept a glance at Meenakshi’s soldiers.

Lakhan nodded and went back inside the tent with the girl. Once it was done, the boy looked at Meenakshi and said, ‘You can proceed, my lady.’

‘For a Manav speaking to a Rakshas, you are quite polite.’

‘Do I have a choice?’

She chuckled, coming close, as her eyes scanned his muscular chest and chiseled shoulders … but she was searching for something else, an engraving. ‘Where have you come from?’

‘Nowhere. We are Mlecchas.’

Meenakshi narrowed her gaze. ‘I see.’ He was lying. His demeanour clearly screamed royalty. ‘I happen to hear that Ayodhya’s prince was seen around with his wife and his brother. Do you think the reports are true or …?’

When he heard that, he froze.

It was him. My spies were right.

‘What do you want?’ asked Lord Raghav, the exiled prince of Ayodhya.

‘I want a tax for this land, I need the capital running.’

‘We don’t have money.’

‘You need to give me something, my dear.’ Meenakshi came forward, smiling feverishly, as she stood inches away from Raghav, her eyes narrowly searching for any mark on his chest.

He pulled up his shawl in defence. Raghav was uncomfortable. ‘We hunt … we can … erm … share the spoils.’

Meenakshi was studying the prince’s blue eyes. It was the fabled prince of Ayodhya, the man who was so powerful that he could easily kill anyone.

But if he was Raghav … he had to have … she had heard about it. *It could be a lie too. It could be a myth.*

Meenakshi knew the only way to know it for sure. And as much as her shyness was getting the better of her, she circled her arms around Raghav, her eyes matching his as she said to him, ‘What else can you give?’ Her long nails tracing the outline of his shawl.

‘I am married, my lady.’

‘You are so sweet.’ And she slipped her hands down his chest, pulling the shawl down, revealing his bare chest …

He instantly pushed her back.

The soldiers behind her raised their swords, but Meenakshi swept her arm indicating they should retreat because her gaze fell on the very thing she had come all the way for, what she had heard about Raghav back in Lanka from the city spies but couldn’t believe, the very thing that would be the instrument of her vengeance.

It was the crisscrossed lines of the Shrivatsa symbol — the symbol of Lord Vishnu, which he bestowed to the Dharm of his age, marking him as the Avatar of Vishnu. She had heard all about it when she was young, from her grandfather, Sumali.

And at realizing what Meenakshi was glaring at, Raghav pulled up his shawl.

‘How dare you!’ yelled Raghav. ‘You squint-eyed, dark-skinned scum!’

At that moment, Laxman and the lady came out of the tent. The lady obviously being Sita, and Meenakshi had heard enough about her.

Meenakshi sighed. Plans were running amok in her mind, but she chose to show that she was offended by Raghav’s petty comment. ‘You rejected me. You will pay for it.’ And with that, she made her way back towards the caravan and seated herself inside.

The caravan moved and Meenakshi took another deep sigh, as she controlled herself, panting.

‘Are you okay?’ Kumbini patted her in the back, her beady eyes watching intently.

‘It’s him. It surely is him. And he has it.’

‘Isn’t that good?’ Kumbini smiled.

‘Yes.’ She smiled, embracing her handmaiden. She had waited for this day for so long, since Vidhyut had died. And she would have got the Avatar on a silver platter.

But now, everything had to be planned perfectly.

‘How do you want to go about this?’ Kumbini asked.

Meenakshi didn’t say anything. Instead, she pulled out her dagger which dangled on the side of her gown and instantly brought the blade next to her nose, slitting the tip of it. A searing, excruciating pain shot through her body as blood began to spurt.

‘MY LADY! Why would you do this?’ shrieked Kumbini.

But instead of groaning, Meenakshi smiled. ‘My dear,’ she sighed, ‘I know *exactly* what I’m going to do and how I’m going to do it.’

3. Meghnad

I’m being followed.

They were everywhere, the Maruts. Deva guards with golden breastplates and greyish skins, lined across the gates. The lanes and the streets of Amravati, for Meghnad to make his journey towards the Chintamani Stones, were tougher than he had anticipated.

Fortunately, he was in disguise.

The moment he had escaped, he rushed to a dark corner outside Indrasabha and pulled out a prosthetic nose which he had created from clay back in Lanka. He wore that and then pulled out a long shawl from a small pouch in his belt, with which he covered his face and his head, to mask his distinguishable oily hair and moustache.

Once that was done, he was back on the streets hiding in plain sight, crookedly walking, hunched purposefully to act like an old lady with a bent nose.

And surprisingly, no one noticed. The streets were filled with Maruts who scanned the citizens, but no one cared to watch an old lady moving away from the bustle of the exterior grounds of Indrasabha.

And that was when Meghnad noticed. A Marut, shorter than others, had begun to follow him.

With each step that Meghnad took, the Marut took another. And Meghnad could feel his heartbeat rising in his throat, hoping he wouldn’t catch him.

Because truthfully speaking, he was alone here in Amravati. But he had a plan.

He was moving towards the Nalanda Gardens — an open reservoir of flora for civilians to sit, chat and eat the many luscious fruits that grew there.

But it also held the Chintamani Stones.

The gardens were visible from far, in the midst of the long, white towers, keeps and shacks that populated this kingdom. The gardens, though, were just a few yards away from Indra’s palace.

The sun was hidden here, and the skies were roaring and dissipating with

thunder. The people seemed oddly frenetic, walking at a brisk pace, and yet, confused.

Meghnad strolled, as if he really was an old lady when from the corner of his eyes he saw the Marut following him, coming in front. Meghnad hid his face and rasped in an old lady's voice, the one he had learnt during his classes in illusionary disguise training, 'What is it, boy?'

The Marut for a moment was confused. 'Ma'am, where do you plan to go? It is dangerous for someone your age to be here.'

'Oh, I see,' Meghnad sighed, realizing the Marut didn't see through his acting, 'Can you please guide me to Nalanda? I have to pick some berries.'

'Of course, ma'am.'

He guided Meghnad from the crowd, pushing the men and women who were coming in between. Whispers of a heretic disappearing like a magician were being heard; many were shivering and even yelling as if ghosts had appeared amongst them. They said he used the magic of Maya, an illusion which the Rakshasas possess.

Meghnad scoffed under his breath for many didn't know that Maya was not magic, but an art of manufactured illusion mixed with science. The smoke bomb was a mixture of an oxidizer, fuel, sodium bicarbonate and a powdered organic dye to hold them all together.

Meghnad controlled his pace and moved sluggishly like a snail.

'What is all this nuisance about?'

'Ma'am, a Rakshas is on the loose,' the Marut said and he looked heroic, just like every other guard out there. They were fair and good-looking with light eyes. 'We are trying to contain the situation but till then, I would suggest you return to your house once you pick your berries.'

'Of course, I see. You see, boy, I have to bring some food for my kids. They are famished, dear.' He coughed and tried really hard not to overact.

'I understand,' the Marut nodded, as they finally reached the insides of the Nalanda Gardens which had wide recesses, small platforms and fruit trees of all kinds whose canopies shadowed over the colourful pink shrubs and bushes. But what was most beautiful, were the snowcapped hills in the background and he knew what they were — Mount Meru, the celestial abode of the Saptarishis, the seers of mankind.

Meghnad noticed, no one was around and he stopped. 'Thank you so much, boy. You have my blessings.'

'Of course, ma'am,' he smiled, bringing his hand forward.

Meghnad shook it, gratefully.

And that was when he saw — the Marut's eyes widening looking at

Meghnad’s palm. And he realised why.

The palm was without wrinkles.

‘Ma’am, I would like to see your face.’ The Marut said. ‘For security purposes.’

Meghnad’s heart thumped, but he knew what he had to do.

He pulled the shawl away from his face, revealing his smile. Instantly, he swept the shawl towards the Marut, blinding him as Meghnad, grabbed hold of the Marut’s fastened sword.

The Marut fell back and Meghnad plunged the blade into his heart.

And then, he twisted it.

The Marut groaned, before falling limp.

I can’t be this stupid.

He looked at his hand and then pulled his prosthetic nose away, as he walked to the mystifying groves that populated the place. The wind blew harshly here, while the ravine that flew underneath the platforms was crystallized in nature. Everything around here was so pristine.

He pulled out the radioactivity locator with red and blue shades over it. It was a small device invented by the scientist, Kumbhkaran, Meghnad’s uncle. It looked like a compass with a pendulum and it oscillated towards the side shaded red if a radioactive metal was nearby.

Meghnad began to survey the river, walking calmly as he kept his gaze on the pendulum. The spy reports had said way back before Dashanan’s useless conquest, that they had found transmissions when they carried the radioactivity locator with them. That time, they had only come to spy on their enemies, but were surprised to find the Chintamani Stones were radioactive in nature. And they had told Meghnad and Dashanan at length where it was.

And it was in this shiny river at Nalanda Gardens.

He bent close to the water and put his hand inside it. He could feel balls of crystal in his palm, nestling in it. And then he pulled his hand out, to study the stones.

‘The Chintamani,’ he breathed with a smile.

The Deva king didn’t know that the stones he mined from this earth and put in the river for their glint were, though harmless, radioactive in nature. If fused together with another element in a compressed vessel — it could create a bomb. It was all very scientific, but many didn’t care because science was still something new to them, something alien.

But the Rakshas, due to Kumbhkaran’s inventions and discoveries, had embraced it, especially Dashanan who wanted to create bombs for his arsenal against his enemies. He called them Astras.

And Meghnad loved experimenting with them. He loved bombs and everything about them, from its creation to the explosion.

I need a bigger bag.

Meghnad's plan was to collect as many Chintamani Stones as possible from the river. But he wouldn't be able to do it alone.

I need backup.

He had to call his brothers.

He pulled out another condensed ball from his pocket. They were of different sizes to distinguish them from each other. The one he had taken out was big and green in colour.

This is going to attract a lot of attention.

With as much strength as he could gather, he threw the ball of firework into the air. It had many volatile elements trapped inside with green paper which would unwrap while throttling in the sky. With the pressure from the throw and the oxygen acting as a stimulator, the element burst so loudly that Meghnad shut off his ears.

It was a ringing sound, but it didn't show off any colour nor did it create fire. Instead, it emitted a wheezing noise.

It was a call for help, for his brothers who were stationed outside the kingdom. They needed some signal, in this case, a high-pitched signal, to enter the city. The noise would remain there in the skies for a while so they could locate the Nalanda Gardens.

The plan was simple. Meghnad would go inside to locate the Gardens of Nalanda and then he would call for backup, once he got the stones.

The next step, though, would be the toughest.

But before the step could be carried out, the Maruts had entered the Gardens, clearly attracted by the sound. At the sight of the Rakshas prince, they pulled out their blades and surrounded him, while he stood alone with a placid grin on his face.

Hoping those loitering brothers of mine come fast.

'Well,' Meghnad said, tightening his fist as he looked at the dozen of Maruts, 'What are we waiting for?'

4. Suparnika

‘The man who will wield this symbol, will spell the end of the Rakshas Empire.’

These words of Sumali, her grandfather, still rung in her ears. In his later years, the man had gone mad. Dashanan stopped taking him seriously, so did Khara, the middle brother of the five grandchildren. Sumali’s hair had gone pure white and he had begun to create the symbol of Shrivatsa on the walls and floor with his blood.

Meenakshi still recalled the time when she entered her father’s room to see blood splattered around the floor as he lay crumpled in one corner.

It was horrible.

And this symbol was a myth till today when she saw it with her own eyes. Many thought the Avatar of Vishnu wouldn’t turn up in this Age, for Lord Vishnu had backed off from the fear of the great Raavan, but it was not the truth.

His soldier was here and he was in hiding, so no one would know his identity.

But I know of it now.

She recalled her question to her father.

‘Why do you think he will end us?’

‘Because he sides with Dharm and we side with Adharm. The atrocities we have committed — if history has taught us anything, the Avatar will come and vanquish us.’

Whether they were magical visions or purely a supposition, it *could* be true. No one had seen the power of an Avatar in this Age.

Until now.

Sumali had even mentioned one more thing — the secret. But to see that happen, she had to bring her plan to the forefront.

As her caravan stopped in front of the gates of Janasthan, she saw Governor Khara standing with his mercenaries — the cold blooded soldiers of Pisach origin. The Pisach were inked, paid warriors who were cannibalistic in nature. Khara was here to welcome them from their visit to Panchavati, for he thought they had gone out to hunt.

Kumbini said, as they neared, ‘Are you sure about this? Do you really believe

what your father has said? You could be wrong about it.'

'Then that beautiful bastard,' she said about Raghav, 'dies and we plan something else. But this is worth a shot.' She held her handkerchief over her bloody nose. 'Now, my dear sister, watch me act!'

The caravan halted and Meenakshi stormed out of it, with tears in her eyes. She whimpered as Khara's face turned impassive. He was a short, bald man, with a little tummy and in tight black leather overalls. On seeing her, a horrified Khara came forward with concern. 'What happened?' He held on to her shoulders. 'Who did this to you?'

'There was …' she pressed her nose, letting the blood flow out evenly and scaring Khara. 'There was a strange man in Panchavati. I went to talk to him about taxes but instead, he attacked me.'

'Why didn't you tell your soldiers to do something?' He yelled and then he looked at the soldiers behind Meenakshi. 'WHY DIDN'T YOU ALL DO ANYTHING? YOU SHOULD HAVE TAKEN HIS HEAD!'

Shoot! I forgot I had backup. I have to think of something.

'No, I didn't want to hurt him. He … escaped.' She was trying to come up with stuff out of thin air, but Khara was too oblivious and worried to look between the lines.

'That bastard! I shall have his head.' He ordered his Pisach mercenaries. 'Roll the chariots and take the head off that imbecile when you find him. Search every nook and corner of that place. How do we identify him?'

'He has a wife and a friend with him. They are three in number.' Meenakshi prodded the mercenaries.

The Pisach nodded, leaving for the inside of the city to find the horse-driven carriages.

Khara rubbed her shoulders and hugged her. Behind Meenakshi, Kumbini came and he bowed to her. 'I'm glad my sister is safe. Meenakshi, you must rest.'

'I am just angry.' She shook her head. 'Why aren't you going with them?'

'With whom?'

'Your men.'

Khara flickered a nervous shrug. 'Uh … I should, shouldn't I?'

'Of course. Your sister's honour has been defiled.'

Khara nodded. 'Yes, my dear.' He kissed her hand and rushed inside the city with the rest of his men to find the royal chariot.

Kumbini squared next to Meenakshi, smiling: 'Well, it worked.'

'Let's see if this Raghav is really any threat to us.' Meenakshi smiled back.

'And if he's not?'

Meenakshi’s smile withered. ‘Then my vengeance will be delayed or … worse, it will never see the light of the day.’

5. Meghnad

He narrowly missed the blade of death.

For a moment, he relied on his good fortune and then his eyes darted at the Marut who swung the sword — cutting through air swiftly, hoping to make contact with Meghnad's skin.

But Meghnad rolled back and fell on the ground. The Maruts were not a joke. First, they had the exoskeleton of the Devas which meant that they had tough physiology. Second, they were ruthless … and well, good looking too for a private army.

Meghnad was a capable warrior if he would get the opportunity of wielding a weapon. But he didn't. Rather, the Maruts were surrounding him, and preparing to leap towards him.

He knew what he had to do. And this was a foolproof method.

He ran.

And he ran away from the pristine river which held the Chintamani Stones and away from the Maruts who were chasing him.

And then suddenly he stopped.

The Maruts were confused, as their golden breastplates glistened under the dry, hot sun.

'Before you try to kill me and, well … leave me to bleed to death, I have a proposition for all of you.'

The Maruts looked at each other in confusion.

'Why don't you join the Rakshas Empire? I mean, we are quite the amazing lot, believe me when I say it.' His hands went in his pockets casually.

'The Rakshas are demons!'

Meghnad twirled his moustache. 'Do I look like a demon to you? I mean I'm too handsome for that kind of a derogatory term.'

The sword of the Marut was hurled in front, grazing his neck. The Deva soldiers began to move closer towards Meghnad.

Great.

'Your distraction and magic wouldn't help you here. We have cornered you.'

One of the guards spoke in a low monotone.

‘Really?’ Meghnad smiled, as he rolled another bomb which he had managed to pull out from his belt, while distracting the guards with his words.

‘Have you?’

And then he slid down and kicked the bomb towards them, creating a huge, blinding light, stunning them right at the spot. Meghnad closed his eyes and instead of running …

He stayed there and with quick jabs he began to attack the Marutss while they remained blinded. Meghnad threw sharp blows at their throats, twisted their arms, and then used their weapons to stab them through the forehead.

‘HE’S INVISIBLE! HE’S KILLING US!’

Idiots. I’m not invisible. I’m here. You just can’t see me.

As the stun bomb was losing its essence, he realised that the surviving Maruts were regaining their senses and because of their gigantic height, they instantly pinned Meghnad to the ground.

Swallowing a nervous lump, he realised that out of a dozen, he had managed to kill only four guards by stunning them. While the remaining eight were now grabbing their weapons and making their way towards him.

The guard at the front was the fastest as he grabbed Meghnad by the throat and lifted him up as Meghnad tried to slither away from his gasp.

But he was choking. And he felt his end was close.

‘You sneaky bastard! What sorcery do you possess!’

‘It’s … science …’ Meghnad’s face was glowing red. His veins had started to pop, as he heard the chopper wing sound from above and he knew what it was.

The shadow of that object that towered over all of them, also gave it away.

‘And that too …’ Meghnad pointed at his backup, the Pushpak Vimana on which his two brothers stood, ‘… is science. But for entertainment purposes, you can call it magic.’

And he kicked the confused Marut between his legs. The Marut loosened his grip and Meghnad came on to his feet, twisting his armed wrist and then using his blade to plunge it in the guard’s throat. Blood spurted out, as the lifeless Marut fell back.

Five were left.

But they were all looking at the Vimana — in horror and delight.

‘What is that?’

‘Is that a bird?’

‘Is that … from another world?’

The Vimana came close to the land and the roaring engine that was fuelled by burning Soma Stones at a lighter degree in a compressed, isolated cylinder began

to die down. It was shaped as a chariot, but it had wings like a vulture on both sides, to glide in the air, while its two levers — one that started the engine and one that tempered it down were in the front, while in the middle there was a semicircular wheel that helped direct the Vimana's direction.

And on that chariot, stood his brothers …

Atikaya and Akshaya.

It was Atikaya first, who with his trident, instantly lurched from the vehicle at the stunned Maruts. Using a choreographic way of dealing with his weapon, he swathed through two Maruts with ease. He had curly hair, and long side-burns with a scarred nose.

The other one, Akshaya, pulled out his bow and arrow and shot six arrows in succession at the Marut who was advancing towards him. He was short, still in his late teens, and had papery hair. He was a little on the obese side.

But he was a fine archer.

He shot the arrows right through their eyes … just the way he was taught.

As it was over, Meghnad ordered his brothers to bring the sack that they had brought from Lanka. They came close to the river and began to stuff the crystals by dipping the sack inside it.

'How come they never discovered these?' Atikaya talked about the Chintamani's radioactive elements, laughing incredulously.

'Because they were short-sighted, little brother. Always remember, be ambitious otherwise you'll have Rakshasas in your kingdom looting you …' he paused, as Akshaya laughed at the statement, 'like us.'

'Dada,' Akshaya said, 'y-y-you were f-f-fabulous with the planning. We a-a-actually heard it outside the kingdom.' He referred to the oxygen sensitive firework that Meghnad had thrown to buzz them for backup.

'Yeah, yeah,' Atikaya was the younger of the brothers and a rebel when showing appreciation. 'I still don't understand why we didn't just take the Vimanas directly rather than you sneaking in first, getting caught, and then, using your disguise to locate the stones.'

'Because, my dear impulsive brother, the Vimanas make too much noise and they are big enough for anyone to spot. We wouldn't have enough time to locate the gardens since we would have been plummeted by the arrows from the Deva army by then. Also, if by chance, we would have found the gardens without getting spotted, there was a risk of damaging the Vimana and you also know that these precious machines we have are very less in number and are quite difficult to construct. We cannot risk using them in battle,' Meghnad explained to his obstinate brother.

Atikaya shrugged.

But Meghnad knew both of them loved him. ‘Is it done?’

Akshaya nodded, showing the sack was full.

Meghnad smiled. ‘I will make multiple Vaishnavaastras out of this for our arsenal.’

‘W-w-why do y-y-you call it that?’ Akshaya asked.

‘Because Deva myths have this idea that the Chintamani Stones comes from Lord Vishnu, so it’s an ironical name because Vishnu is a preserver and this Astra … consider it my weapon of destruction, heh.’ Meghnad’s eyes widened with malicious delight.

They all walked to the Vimana, keeping it in the back, right next to the metal cylinder in a glass box.

As Atikaya and Akshaya began to push the lever, they saw more Maruts entering the scene. Meghnad sat in the back, as he grabbed Akshaya’s bow and arrow, and started shooting them. But his shots mostly wounded them and because of that, other Maruts were waiting to check on their partners.

‘Never kill them. The body loses its significance.’ Meghnad explained to his younger brothers.

The Vimana engine began to roar and suspend in the fast, heavy air as they were lifted fifty feet above the ground. The skies were now close enough that they could touch and feel it.

‘Take me to the outside of Indra’s palace,’ Meghnad ordered Atikaya who directed the wheel forward, pushing the Vimana, and accelerating it. ‘We are going to free our father now.’

‘Dada, you n-n-never explained this part to u-u-us.’ Akshaya stammered.

‘Yeah,’ Atikaya shrugged. ‘Do you have a plan or are we just going to fly down and save him?’

‘Flying down and saving him could mean our deaths. Our father has been hung like a scarecrow at a place where most of the guards are on high alert. We need to distract them.’ He paused. ‘And well, this part was dependent on whether we get the Chintamani Stones because now I know *how* to distract them.’ Meghnad said grinning as he looked at the compressed cylinder and the Soma Stones.

Atikaya and Akshaya glanced at each other nervously.

Amravati destroyed my father’s reputation.

Now I shall destroy them.

6. Laxman

Everything was in chaos.

He opened his eyes to see fire and death. Laxman felt a surging energy that drove him to grab his quiver and his bow, as he darted from his static position to an active one.

He had been hit by the hilt earlier and had been out of the zone for a minute before he came back to his senses.

Raghav was in one corner, with his bow and arrow, shooting them precisely and even using daggers and swords to fend off the Pisach.

Sita was nowhere to be seen though. Almost from nowhere, a sword materialized in front of him, Laxman took a step backwards, confused, until he spied a Pisach — inked, with wormy teeth, grinning maliciously. Laxman pulled out an arrow and shot it through the Pisach's head. It fell back with a tremor.

There weren't many. Only more than a dozen but they were mostly going towards Raghav as if … as if he was important.

Laxman was worried about Sita Maa though.

I have to find her.

He pushed himself forward, sprinting. Three arrows were nocked on the bow as he began to swiftly shoot them one by one at the incoming Pisach.

One got hit on the head, while the other one's throat burst open, whilst the third one deflected it …

The surviving Pisach jumped over Laxman.

Laxman instantly used his bow as a deterrent in between the two. The Pisach, with its hereditary sharp incisors was trying to gnaw his face away, but Laxman grabbed hold of a rock next to him and smacked it right across his head, making a dent in his skull.

Getting to his feet, he closely saw the breastplate that the fallen Pisach wore. He found that the Rakshas Empire symbol was engraved on it.

It must be that woman's involvement. First, we are thrown out of our kingdom and then we are treated like this. What else?

And then he heard it — the sound of Sita's cry. It was coming from the

woods.

By grabbing hold of the Pisach's sword, he went into the forest, leaving Raghav alone to deal with the Pisach.

Laxman found himself amidst the heavy set of trees, the dark canopies and the horrifying mist that sent shivers down his spine. He smelled the groves, as he went forward, yelling: 'SITA MAA!'

It was his duty to protect her.

What kind of a brother-in-law am I?

He could almost pity himself.

And that was when he saw an axe brandished at him.

It took him almost a moment, but he knelt. The axe went past him.

As he came back to his feet, he saw the figure rushing towards him. He was large, quite dusky and had oiled skin … and he looked like a Rakshas, with his hulking body, before he smashed Laxman to the ground.

Groaning, Laxman's grip on the blade loosened. As he tried to get hold of it — the Rakshas with his two fists smacked his dominant arm, the one he used to shoot arrows with.

Not this one!

A shooting pain went past his body as tears brimmed in the corners of his eyes.

'Die, northerner,' spoke the Rakshas, grinning. 'By my hands.'

Laxman's hand went for his quiver instantly, pulling an arrow and stabbing the Rakshas in the eye, who fell back, shrieking in horror.

'You spoke too soon,' Laxman had learnt to use the arrows not just as a companion to his bow, but as a blade.

'HELP!'

He heard Sita Maa again.

'LADY SITA!' Laxman yelled.

'I'm here!'

And then he heard from where it was coming — towards the south. He began to move, but he could feel his right wrist hurting and dangling aimlessly.

I can't shoot.

He saw the chariot in front of him, on which a bald-headed Rakshas stood, holding and grabbing on to Sita Maa.

How dare he!

Laxman squared next to the golden chariot, gritting his teeth. 'Leave her.'

But the Rakshas didn't obey. He held her even tighter by one arm, across her waist while she tried to push him away, while with another, he wielded a sword.

'You lot hurt our women and we are supposed to be okay with it? When we

do the same, it's wrong? Because your women are pious …' he looked at the fair-skinned princess of Mithila, 'and our women are hags?'

'We didn't hurt anyone.'

The Rakshas scoffed. 'Her nose shall be cut, the same way you cut our woman's.'

Laxman didn't understand what was going on, but his right hand was weak and he had to figure out a way to do something.

The Rakshas brought forth the blade close to Sita Maa's nose, who whimpered in return when Laxman shouted: 'LOOK OUT!' He lunged to his left, away from the Rakshas.

Instantly, the Rakshas was confused and followed his leap, when Laxman before tumbling down, pulled out another of his arrows and tossed it to Sita Maa.

And she grabbed on to it, plunging it deep inside the Rakshas's throat, taking advantage of the trivial distraction.

Sita Maa left the startled, bloody Rakshas who was holding on to his wound trying to stop the blood from spilling out, as he fell from the chariot. And she rushed from there, embracing Laxman, tightly.

'Who was that?' asked Laxman.

'He was the governor of Danda Kingdom and the brother of Raavan.' Her eyes lit up in worry.

'All right, my lady,' Laxman could feel his heart drop at the mention of the Rakshas Emperor. 'But I'm glad you defended yourself well.'

She grinned, with mud, dirt and scars partially adorning her face.

Laxman, though, amidst all this chaos and war and horror, couldn't understand why this attack happened.

He thought we cut her nose.

What dangerous game is Meenakshi playing with all of them?

7. Meghnad

If he didn’t do it right, their Vimana might just explode.

And not only him, his brothers would die with him too.

I don’t care about my life. But my mother would weep about how much of a careless man I was, that I didn’t take care of my baby brothers.

And the thought of disappointing his mother haunted him.

I have to do this right.

They were in the air, amidst the clouds and the chill was spot on. He could feel the air grappling hold of his soul and wrenching it apart. He tightened the black tunic around his chest while he worked on his explosive.

The cylinder was in the front.

First, he took the Soma Stones, and with a hammer he had on board, he broke one stone, smashing it repeatedly till it became powdery. He slipped it inside one part of the cylinder — the part where the blue ingredient glowered. Then on the other end, he used the Chintamani Stone crystal. He began to mix them, shaking the cylinder softly.

‘Wh-what are you doing, dada?’ asked Akshaya, as he sat next to him, refilling his quiver with the arrows that they had kept as a safety stock.

‘Mixing radioactive elements to create a fission,’ Meghnad grinned.

‘A bomb? Like the one you made long back?’ Atikaya said, as his hair wept back due to the harsh winds.

Meghnad recalled the first bomb he made — just out of Somas. It was from the leftover manuscripts of Lord Rudra, the Second Shiva who had a nuclear weapon called Pashupatastra, this was a really long time ago during Varaha’s time — the third Avatar of Vishnu. It was difficult since Meghnad was just a child then and he had little knowledge about nuclear physics. But when the Rakshasas had found the hidden Soma reservoirs that Satyajit, also known as the second Indra, had left behind for healing purposes, they created weapons out of it instead of getting drunk on it or using it as medicine.

It’s all about perspective.

The Pashupatastra was still used by the Rakshasas in extreme situations. But

he was always obsessed with creating more …

Which he was doing now!

But this was dangerous. First, if the fission was stirred together harshly, it might blow up. Second, the moment, it was mixed, it cannot touch the ground with impact, for even the slightest one might cause an explosion.

And they all could die.

‘It’s done.’ He grinned, showing the purplish fusion of a crystal and powder that gleamed brightly.

Akshaya just watched in awe, while Atikaya turned his head to see. ‘WOW!’ He smiled and then he lost control …

The chariot dwindled and for a moment Meghnad could feel the weapon slipping from his hands and falling on the floor …

Their smiles faded.

And then Meghnad put his foot forward, holding the explosive cylinder at the corner of his ankle.

But he couldn’t do it for long.

‘Take control of the bloody flight!’ Meghnad ordered.

The Vimana was still unstable, as the wind was strong.

‘Take it down and we might be safe from these winds!’ Meghnad suggested, as he leaned forward towards his ankle.

If it falls, it’ll blow.

It can’t hit the floor.

He grabbed hold of the cylinder and he breathed a sigh of relief, when instantly the Vimana dropped with a jerk, pushing away from the cold winds and down.

Meghnad’s hand slipped from the cylinder and it was suspended in the air …

No.

He gritted his teeth and he leapt from his position, grabbing the cylinder and hugging it tightly …

When the Vimana straightened and everything around him rocked and tossed around, he held on to the cylinder as tight as he could.

‘Sorry!’ exclaimed Atikaya, who had resumed his position now. ‘We had to escape the winds so we had to do the drastic otherwise it wouldn’t have happened.’

‘Your daredevilry would have been appreciated by me if I wasn’t carrying a nuclear explosive,’ Meghnad, wiping his sweat, stood upright. ‘Now, take this forward.’ He ordered Atikaya, referring to the Vimana, which now stood above the nucleus of the city.

‘W-w-what is the plan?’ asked Akshaya.

Meghnad knew it, right to its minutest details.

They were close to Indrasabha and he could see Vaijayanta, Indra's palace, standing as a white, shining beacon with black arches and conical tops, amidst the lower towers.

'You need to speed up when I say it,' Meghnad said to Atikaya. 'And you to have to move towards Vaijayanta Palace …' where Dashanan was strung up on a metal pole and disrespected in front of everyone.

Atikaya nodded, though he was confused.

'Are y-y-you going to drop it, dada?' The naive beady eyes of Akshaya looked at Meghnad.

Not now.

'But y-y-you will kill many c-c-civilians,' he said, 'children, m-m-mothers … innocents.'

Meghnad thought for a moment, as he saw the topography of the entire settlement around Indrasabha. Everyone looked like ants and he felt like a god … ruling over them. He had to do it, because he had to distract the guards that were around Dashanan.

But he also had to do it …

Because how their ruler, Indra, treated his father, disrespected him, as if Rakshasas are nothing.

They are something. They, no, we, are the most powerful out there. And I will show them, all of them.

'I have to. For the empire. For our father.' He smiled at Akshaya and he dropped the cylinder … potentially killing hundreds of innocents.

8. Suparnika

She walked amidst the corpses of her men.

The prince had left with his wife and his brother — Lakhan, or popularly known as Laxman. She had gotten all her information from the band of spies who were stationed in Ayodhya before issues started cropping up.

Ayodhya politics was based on honour and keeping their word, so the only reason Raghav left and remained in exile was so that he could keep the word of the late Dashrath who promised Bharat, his son born from his second wife Kaikeyi, would be his heir after his death. Raghav was chosen because of his popularity but Kaikeyi didn't allow it. She also realised that if Raghav remained in the empire, the rebels, the people who loved him will conspire against her son and Bharat's safety will be jeopardised. And because of that, Raghav made the ultimate sacrifice: he exiled himself so nothing would happen to the empire and his brother.

Meenakshi liked such nobility and such valour in a person. And seeing these corpses in Panchavati woods, she could surely see that Raghav was actually a tougher opponent than any for the Rakshas Empire.

And he could be used well.

Meenakshi walked to the chariot where a mortally wounded Khara was struggling, close to it. She had come alone, for Kumbini was just a handmaiden and she shouldn't witness everything that Meenakshi does.

The daunting trees crowded her, the horrible stench of the bodies sneaked into her nostrils. She tried to mask the stench with her handkerchief. The sound of silence and looming terror of the Avatar rested amidst the mist.

She saw Khara struggling with an arrow in his throat, as he was trying to get hold of the chariot doors, his bloody hands wiping over it. On seeing Meenakshi, his voice wheezed and a faint, pale smile appeared on his face.

'H-help …' he cried with his dying voice. 'Please …'

Meenakshi knelt close to Khara, her bandaged nose pricking as she watched him with a frown. 'Does it hurt? Because it hurt Vidhyut too. Do you remember what you did to him?'

Khara was watching her in horror, as Meenakshi grabbed the arrow that was stuck in his throat and she pushed it deeper into his flesh.

He groaned and the sparrows squawked in the background.

‘He believed in you but you backstabbed him, you vermin.’ She gritted her teeth. ‘You were my brother and you slaughtered the love of my life.’ She raised her brows saying, ‘Do you know why I came here? To check whether you actually died. But you piece of worm, you still haven’t.’ She pushed it further deep and blood was spurting on her face as she did it.

But she didn’t care.

‘He will be my champion, he will be my vengeance. Raghav is powerful. You brought enemies to him and he’s safe, his family is safe, and he is surely powerful. He’s the Avatar.’

Khara’s eyes widened at her last comment.

‘Yes, with the symbol, the same symbol Father used to be afraid of. Guess our end is near. And I’m more than happy to lend my hand in that.’

And she finally dug the arrow blade until Khara’s eyes were frozen. She wiped the blood off her face and stood up.

Father was right. He was not mad. He was a genius. His knowledge about the Avatar’s end of the Rakshas Empire, his secret is now my weapon.

But to execute what that secret held, she had to carry out the next step.

She had to kill the man who was responsible for her husband’s unfair death.

Her oldest brother.

Raavan.

9. Meghnad

The explosion was massive.

He could see from above how people's bodies were laid in waste, buildings were shattered and smoke riled around. The nurses ran for help, while the guards were in mass confusion, trying to assess the damage. Horror had engulfed the place. Indrasabha was half-broken, collapsing on one end, over the burnt corpses of children, women and men.

Meghnad didn't know what he felt.

But he sure knew what he didn't feel — remorse.

There was no sympathy for these people, but when he turned his head to see Akshaya — the nubile, healthy Rakshas with innocent, blinking eyes, Meghnad realised he had just set an example.

Good or bad … that is yet to be decided.

'Are w-w-we evil, d-dada?' Akshaya stammered.

Meghnad clenched his jaw. 'We might be in Swarg, but back in Lanka, we are heroes. And that's what matters more, brother.' He tugged at Akshaya's hair and smiled at him. 'Remember, we fight for our land, for our legacy.'

Meekly, the youngest son of Dashanan nodded.

Atikaya meanwhile had managed to push the Vimana downwards where Indra's humongous palace stood. As they were descending amongst the frantic chaos of the people, Meghnad could see the fear of the Rakshasas visible in everyone's eyes.

The palace had a white marble staircase, so wide and large that it went on till the palatial gates. The statues of the Devas — Agni, Varuna, the previous Indra — stood tall and huge. And in between …

His father was wrapped around, on a pole, bleeding and unconscious.

But very much alive.

The Vimana rested on the ground, while the smoke of the attack singed his lungs. He saw the fires and the screams. He could smell the darkness he had created.

The skies had gone awry, into a burst of thunder.

Meghnad advanced from his position with his blade, clenched hard, in his hands.

He walked towards the pole and with one hand, pulled it apart, resting it on the ground.

People behind him saw all of this, but didn't do anything. Some called the guards, and some remained silent.

Meghnad tore the ropes that tied his father — he was massively built, but was wounded and scarred, with blood trickling from his bearded face and his beautiful hair, all pasty and greasy now. He picked up his father and brought him to the Vimana, placing him in the backseat when he heard it …

'SON OF DASHANAN!'

Meghnad turned to see Indra — Rocana standing on the top of the staircase with five Maruts on each end.

'You can escape now but I will follow you and murder your Tribe,' Indra's eyes flared with anger, his mouth grim.

Akshaya pleaded from inside the Vimana, 'Let's l-leave. No n-need to fight h-h-him.'

'Yeah, I gotta agree with him on this.' Atikaya said. 'We got Dad.'

Meghnad thought for a moment.

I can leave or I can finally fight this bastard.

'Cover me,' Meghnad whispered to his brothers.

Akshaya realised what this meant and he pulled up his bow and arrow. Meghnad raised his blades and instantly ran towards the staircase.

Rocana realised what he was doing and he directed the Maruts towards him.

As Meghnad came close to attacking one Marut, an arrow sliced across the guard's face with the precision of Akshaya's shot.

And so did another, who came close to Meghnad.

Meghnad saw a Marut appearing right in front of him. The Marut dodged the arrow with his shield and brought his shield to smack Meghnad, who instantly rolled between his legs. He jumped high in the air acrobatically and severed the head of the Marut.

Meghnad's eyes darted towards the gown-wearing Indra, whose fear was now visible on his face.

He calmly walked upstairs as more Maruts approached him. Meghnad used the gestures of his right hand to direct Akshaya's shots in attacking them — one hit the throat, while another got shot in the knees, as he toppled from the staircase which had turned into a pool of crimson.

The last Marut came in between Meghnad and Indra … and Meghnad shot him with a hilt and threw him cascading down the stairs.

Meghnad squared next to the whimpering god of thunder, Rocana, ‘Well, I’m waiting to see if you’ll strike me with your Vajra. Where is it?’ He referred to the weapon that Indra possessed, made from the energies of thunder.

He punched Indra on the face, who fell down and then he grabbed him by the throat and began hitting Rocana, again and again with the hilt of his sword. Meghnad smacked Rocana repeatedly to the point till Rocana’s face was bruised, dripping with blood, resulting in swollen eyes.

‘Enough!’ Akshaya called from the Vimana.

Meghnad sighed, looking at the partially unconscious Indra. ‘I would have liked to take your wife with me. But I can surely make use of you for now.’

And he had a plan.

Oh, it was a great plan.

‘You shouldn’t have taken my father and disrespected him like this. That was very wrong.’ And he grabbed Rocana’s white hair and began to drag him down the staircase.

Blood trailed down the white staircase as Rocana’s swollen face hit every step. The people and the Maruts watched him in horror and awe, of how a vile Rakshas defeated their god, destroyed their city with his magic bomb and looted their minerals.

Meghnad grabbed hold of the ropes that tied his father to the pole and with the same ropes he began to tie the unconscious Indra right in front of the Vimana. Akshaya and Atikaya watched in confusion as they finally realised what he was doing.

When Meghnad was done, he jumped back on his ride and Atikaya used the lever to launch them up into the skies.

All heads of the civilians looked up at the greatest villain they had ever witnessed as Meghnad callously waved at them.

‘Remember this day. Remember. Remember. For this is the black day you’ll always be reminded of …’ he yelled loudly, as everyone shuddered and shivered at his words, ‘of the wrath of Meghnad — the man, who defeated a god.’

10. Laxman

Someone was coming. But they were far off.

‘Who is that?’ asked Raghav.

‘Some forest dweller! How does it matter? We lost our home!’ Laxman yelled. ‘Those bloody, Tribal Outcasts!’

Frustration was surging inside him as he sat outside the lopsided ruins of their hut, where they had been living for a while.

‘Illavarti is not for Tribals like Rakshasas and Vanars and bloody what else!’ Laxman flared his nostrils. ‘It’s for us, for the Manavs, the civilised lot. Because of that woman, we are all in peril, we have lost our home and we could have lost our …’

Raghav lifted his hands, distracting himself from the sight of that rider and to Laxman. ‘Don’t say anything else. Lord Vishnu has blessed us with his protection.’

Laxman shook his head. He was a believer — not in Vishnu, but in his brother. He was an embodiment of a hero, a calm, composed king. And he was so honourable, he left his seat for an incompetent king like Bharat.

Sometimes it hurts to be too good.

‘We should go to Janasthan and kill each and every one of them. In fact, once this exile is over, brother, I shall personally conduct a taskforce in eradicating all the Tribals out here and make it a land for only the Manavs,’ Laxman gritted his teeth, his mouth foaming at the edges.

‘We don’t kill unless we are forced to. And Lord Brahma made these Tribes out of himself. For better or worse, they are our brothers and sisters,’ responded the dark-skinned brother of Laxman. Raghav was fairly dusky for a northern king. ‘And like in every Tribe, even amongst Manavs, brother … there is evil like the one we fought, and there is good as well.’ He patted Laxman on the shoulder. ‘And one should have the sight to see the latter in people.’

Laxman licked his lips, nodding reluctantly, as he turned to see the suspicious-looking rider. He was quite close to them now. But before he could send a signal to his brother, Sita Maa walked inside the broken hut and brought a small brass

bowl which she embraced tightly, smiling to herself.

Laxman didn't remember what she was holding, but he could see Sita Maa being hugged by Raghav as he said, 'This is safe.'

'The only thing that matters.'

And then Laxman recalled that it was the small plate in which Lord Raghav and Lady Sita shared their first meal after their marriage.

And despite being hurt, despite losing their home, they found hope in the smallest of things.

I wish I could be like that.

He rubbed his signet ring which was gifted by his wife, Urmila. *Do I miss her?* It was a forced marriage but she was a good companion.

Perhaps when I return, it'll be all right. I'll learn virtuosity like Raghav and Sita Maa.

And that was when they heard it. The hooves of the stallion. The rider had finally reached them. Laxman noticed that the person he had mistaken for a dweller of these lands was a familiar face.

A despicable face!

Removing the black cloak, it was the dark-skinned Rakshasi, with her cross-eyes and a bandaged nose. And she was alone.

'Why you …?' Laxman came on his feet, pulling out his bow and pointing the arrow towards her. 'You brought misery to us!'

But Raghav instantly brought his hand forward.

'You monster! You cannibal! You witch! You Tribals shall perish!' Laxman yelled, but the Rakshasi was calm.

And so was Raghav, though he spoke to the Rakshasi in a stern voice: 'What is it?'

'I come here for peace.' She raised her arms in surrender. 'I don't mean any harm. When Khara, the man you killed, saw my wound I received during *the hunt,* he thought it was you and he was so impulsive, he just gathered his mercenaries to kill you. I am so sorry. I didn't even have time to explain.'

Laxman glanced at the placid face of Raghav. 'Do you really believe her?' *Her explanation doesn't have a hint of logic.*

'It doesn't matter. These are petty squabbles,' Raghav sighed. 'My lady, you are still the queen here and I apologise for my previous burst of anger. I had no right. My emotions took the better of me.'

He's sorry?

'Such a man you are, it's hard not to respect someone like you.' The Rakshasi smiled. 'I apologise on behalf of the Rakshas Empire and present your wife a peace offering for hurting the sanctity of this marriage.' The Rakshasi knelt

down, showing an amulet in her hand which was made of ruby. ‘It was made from the furnaces fueled by the active volcanoes in Lanka. It’s quite rare and a very prized gift. You can trade it in if you want to get food in towns and you’ll get plenty in return for it.’

Don’t take it. Don’t take it.

Raghav picked it up from her hands. ‘And please stand,’ he said to the Rakshasi who did so instantly. ‘No woman should kneel in front of a man.’ He smiled, as he handed the ruby amulet to Sita Maa, gesturing at her to accept it. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘I must leave.’ The Rakshasi softly smiled before climbing atop her stallion and riding away.

The moment she left, Laxman said to Raghav, ‘I hope we are throwing that away.’

Sita Maa objected and said, ‘And why should we? She was kind enough to gift it to us.’

‘Because of her, we are in danger. And she knows about …’ Laxman pointed at Raghav’s chest where the Shrivatsa symbol was concealed beneath the saffron scarf.

Raghav patted Laxman on the shoulder. ‘Stop seeing evil in everyone, brother. She came here to apologise and a bigger man always forgives. Always. No matter what.’

But what if it wasn’t a simple apology? What if it was more? Another trap? As Sita Maa glared at the ruby, that she was wearing, Laxman couldn’t help but wonder …

What else has this demoness planned for them?

11. Meghnad

‘Kneel and kiss my feet.’

The girl bowed down and did exactly as she was ordered.

It had been a few days since his tryst with Indra and today was his coronation … for his new name.

But instead of celebrating it outside, he had been in his room with naked women parading left, right and centre. They were Apsaras — such beautiful damsels, who didn’t speak, who wouldn’t look him in the eye but would just do what their master ordered them to do.

The girl kissed his feet again and he laughed as he leaned forward from his armed chair and kissed the woman on the mouth. ‘Ah,’ he moaned, with pleasure, ‘I love this freedom. Do you know …’ he grabbed her by the chin, a little too harshly but she didn’t protest because she was his pleasure slave. ‘How much I’ve lost to earn my place here? I killed a man who people think of as a god and today he shall be staked in front of everyone just like he did to my father. You know what I am?’

The girl was silent.

Meghnad stopped smiling and his grip on the woman’s chin wound tighter as she squeaked in fear. ‘Speak, degenerate.’

‘G-god?’ She nervously responded.

‘No. I’m the man you call to kill a god.’ He laughed as he loosened his grip and pushed her down.

Meghnad leaned back on his chair, while three women clung on to his leg, kissing and licking it like his pets. He picked up the glass of wine from the side table and he sipped from it, thinking about all the things he would say at his new name giving.

My father would be so proud of me.

He hadn’t met his father since Dashanan was recovering in his bed. But he had heard from his mother that he was proud of him.

He will tell everyone in public how great I am — today.

There was a knock on the door.

Meghnad shooed the women away and he began to wear his clothes — his dhoti and a long golden sherwani. Then he moved to the door, opening it slightly, where he saw a seven foot tall Rakshas with broad shoulders, who was bald from the front, but had wavy hair at the back. His eyes were sunken, as if they were large, sagging air bags.

It was Kumbhkaran — Dashanan's second brother, Meghnad's uncle and the general of Lanka. A revered scientist, an inventor and a mentor to the prince.

'It's time.' He had a husky voice.

'Awesome.'

'Is there a guest inside?' Kumbhkaran asked.

Meghnad grinned, closing the door behind. 'Nobody important.'

They began to move in the candlelit corridors upon which the Rakshas Empire symbols glinted. Their shadows danced, slightly interrupted by Meghnad's whisper: 'So how does it look? The preparation?'

Kumbhkaran had his hands at the back. 'Grand as always, kid. You did good.' He was considered a mammoth by the Manavs, a giant amongst men even though his height was close to a normal-sized Asura. But then the Asuras were nearly an extinct race after their war with the Vaman Avatar.

Meghnad could feel the elation.

'Though your father couldn't be here today.'

Meghnad shot him a glance of confusion. 'Why is that? I haven't met him since the time we have returned from Amravati.'

'I know. He had to leave for something important.'

'Today *was* important.' Meghnad felt betrayed; angry. He wanted his father's presence. 'For me. He should have realised that.'

'And he does, kid. He's proud of you. But Meenakshi called him from Janasthan. She sent a raven. Apparently, she told him something that made him rush a few days ago.'

Great!

And Meghnad didn't even get to know. He was kept in the dark, but then it was his fault too — he was too busy with the ladies in his room, while drinking himself to sleep for the last couple of days, celebrating his victory.

'He wants you to leave for Naaglok,' Kumbhkaran added.

'Why?' He paused.

'It doesn't matter!'

'I have no choice, do I?' He was cursing under his breath. He was letting his anger get the better of him.

What could be more important than his name-giving? Meghnad wondered. What did the long-nailed Suparnika say in the raven's message? He was curious.

‘And Mother? Did she go too?’

‘She went with him. You know how the queen is, kid.’

Always siding with her husband, callous about her children. Meghnad couldn’t believe this. ‘And I’m sure Atikaya is also gone.’ He said, referring to Dashanan’s favourite son.

‘Yes.’ He nodded glumly as they reached the end of the corridor.

‘Who else is left then?’

‘Me,’ Kumbhkaran smiled softly and Meghnad instantly realised the poison in his words, to which he bit his tongue to remind himself to be more careful around the people close to him. ‘And Akshaya. He was told by your father to leave for Kishkindha. Apparently Vali wanted Dashanan’s help for fending off the neighbouring rebellious parties around his kingdom and your father thinks it’s wise to send the youngest cub. But Akshaya said he will only leave for the Vanar kingdom after this coronation.’

‘Akshaya, my dearest brother!’ Meghnad smiled, but he was still disappointed, as he walked outside where the crowd had gathered around a large open courthouse. A flag was hoisted at the centre and the guards were swarming around a golden pedestal which had long banners adorning the central pillars.

Meghnad ascended the pedestal with Kumbhkaran when he saw Akshaya, clapping amongst the many on the ground. All the Rakshasas and the Rakshasis of Lankapuri, the capital of Lanka, were looking up to him and he wanted to feel happy for what he did … but he didn’t.

His father was not here.

Only the others were.

And he felt sad for himself for without him, it was never enough.

But in the middle of the ground, in the long metal pole, he saw his prize: the bruised god of thunder, the king of Devas — Indra, his head drooping down and his greasy dirty hair falling over his naked body. He looked weak, with his ribs protruding from his pale skin.

As Kumbhkaran announced the valour and the greatness of Prince Meghnad, he could see how much everyone was in awe of him. And those weren’t just the Rakshashas, but also a bunch of Manavs, Pisach and Mlecchas — from all walks of life and race, people lived and rejoiced under his name.

My father is not here.

He must have gone for something urgent. He wouldn’t have, otherwise.

I do everything for him, to seek his approval and in return all I get is his … absence.

And yet, he knew he had to serve his father, serve this throne and serve this empire because he believed in it, because he had faith in it. Because he stood for

nothing else in his life.

He stood for no one else.

And so he buried the anger, letting it simmer.

It's all right. It happens. I have to live with this. He has always been absent in my life.

Ever since not attending his archery contests, from his sword fighting lessons to his first conquest — he was never there to see it. He was always congratulating him, but was never present.

He flared his nostrils as Kumbhkaran took Meghnad's arm and raised it.

'From now onwards, for his bravery, for his heroism, he shall be called …' Kumbhkaran announced, 'RAAVANPUTR INDRAJIT — the conqueror of Amravati, the destroyer of Indra!' And he pointed his free hand towards the starving Indra, who was unconscious and tied to the pole.

Everyone clapped for him. And Meghnad somehow managed a smile, waving to the public when he heard the two words he never thought someone had the courage to say to him: 'WE OBJECT!'

12. Suparnika

He was coming.

She could hear his daunting steps that echoed in the empty, dark corridors of her palace in Janasthan. But she didn't fidget. Her plan was in place. She was looking at the city from the iron-grilled windows and purple drapes that inhibited her sight.

The city was like any other except for its dome-shaped architecture. Instead of towers, it had semi-circular ball like complexes that acted as people's homes. Mostly, Manavs lived here with the exception of some Vanars and Rakshasas. The turbulent skies were grey and the desert occupied the outskirts of the city, where the large arched walls stood still. Ahead of that, lay the Dandak Forest — where the Vanar Kingdom, Kishkindha, was hidden, not visible from here.

Down, close to her palace, she saw Dashanan's men. They were close to his Pushpak Vimana, guarding it with their lives.

He loves that machine more than his wife.

The door burst open, smashing from each end, the sound of it stinging her ears as she felt her heart skip a beat.

I need to play this carefully.

She didn't turn back but remained composed, without meeting the eyes of her brother — the one they called RAAVAN. He had earned that reputation for wherever he went, people would scream out of terror.

But deep down, Meenakshi knew him more than anyone else. A simple, nurtured boy, fair-skinned unlike her, a poet at heart, a secularist but having one major weakness: women. His lust always got the better of him and it was a vice that he carried on his shoulder like a burden.

'Is it true?' The roaring voice came from the back but Meenakshi didn't turn.

'Yes.'

She could feel the shadow of her brother grasping for her as he came close, behind her, his harsh, scarred fingers tracing her shoulders and resting on them. The shadows from the drapes though, covered his face — his striking, bearded face.

‘But Mandodari is sure that she saw the infant die.’ He whispered in her ears.

‘Perhaps her eyes lied.’ Her heart was beating fast. ‘You told me the child carried an amulet?’

‘A birth gift, yes.’

‘A ruby?’

‘From the depths of Lanka.’ Dashanan added.

‘I saw it. She was wearing it.’

He sighed, his deep, husky breath blowing softly in Meenakshi’s ears. ‘Who was she with?’

‘The exiled prince from Ayodhya.’

‘Raghav Ram,’ his voice turned heavier, anger lacing it. ‘I know of him. He is a good man. But not an able ruler.’

Good man? *I have to change his perception of him.*

‘I know. What will you do?’ Meenakshi continued.

And that was when the shadow of her brother left her and Meenakshi gasped for some air, her head turning slightly to see Dashanan taking his hulking body and placing it over the chair, the shadows of the dimly lit room still covering his face. ‘I don’t know. What should I do? Mandodari does not believe you.’

‘She never does. But have I not been always right?’

Dashanan glumly nodded. Meenakshi could feel the tension in the dark room — it was palpitating. She could sense his dilemma. ‘Bharat is a problem for us already. He has been fighting our allied states and destroying our frontiers. If he gets to hear what I have done with Sita, he will double his advances to destroy us.’

‘Because he loves his brother?’

‘Yes.’

Dashanan leaned back, his head cocked in front, his body all loosened up. Meenakshi went and stood behind his chair, and put her arms around his neck, while she swallowed a lump. Even though she had the urge to kill him, she knew she wasn’t that powerful. Dashanan was too strong for her.

And she was too scared.

She liked to play with words but seeing her enemy, her brother, so close, she could almost feel a tinge of regret for doing what she was doing — manipulating and starting an unnecessary war for a crime he committed years ago.

Am I wrong here? Can I be forgiving?

No.

‘What are you going to do?’ She prompted him again.

‘I don’t know.’ He said, his head turning toward her and his crimson eyes glowed in the dark.

Meenakshi could feel that her plan was failing. And she had to do something. ‘Khara was killed.’

‘I heard.’ Dashanan sighed with defeat.

‘It was Raghav who killed him.’ She mocked.

Dashanan smacked his fist on the table in front, instantly as if the anger of being killed by a Manav had got to him. And yet, his voice came out composed and calm when he said: ‘I cried the whole night when I heard it but you know my rule. If a Rakshas from our family dies in a battle, we don’t avenge him because he died of his own karma. So as much as it hurts, he had it coming.’

Meenakshi knew of his brother’s stupid rules. But then, because of his discipline, he was able to conquer the entire Illavarti, and build temples for Lord Shiva. Before him, the Rakshasas were considered immoral, wild beasts.

‘How could he be so stupid by going with such less men?’ Dashanan asked.

‘He was impulsive. I wonder why,’ Meenakshi hid her smile. ‘I have a feeling Raghav is going to be a thorn in your future plans. And do you really believe Sita is safe with him? She’s in more danger.’

Dashanan didn’t say anything, but his silence spoke volumes.

‘Brother, if she is who we think she is, please bring her back to where she belongs, from the man who killed our brother.’ Meenakshi knelt close to the chair, her arms lugging at his feet for mercy. ‘What if he hurts Sita after learning about her heritage?’

Dashanan smacked his fist again. ‘You are right. I have to save her.’

Finally.

‘Who will you go with? You must go alone.’ Meenakshi prompted him for him being alone could lead to his early death.

‘No. Marichi, the Vidhyadhara will be with me.’ He referred to the illusionist and a magician of Janasthan’s court. ‘And my son, Atikaya. Also, a division of my army. I shall not go alone. I shall bring that Raghav’s head and I shall bring back Sita to safety.’ He stood up. Meenakshi saw his full face, while standing next to him and he had this soft, sad smile on it. ‘But is it really her?’

‘Yes. It’s her.’

‘I want to see the ruby too. I want to see it to confirm my doubts before I wage a war against Raghav because that would mean a war against Bharat. For that, I have to go in disguise first.’ He was already planning in his mind.

But Meenakshi believed that even if he went with his army, he would be killed, for Raghav was the Avatar of Vishnu.

‘I want to know for sure,’ he continued, ‘that the princess of Mithila is the same child who I lost many years ago. I want to know whether she really is my … *daughter.’*

13. Meghnad

It was the religious sect of Brahmanism.

They were the ones objecting.

Meghnad saw the white-cloaked rishis entering the scene, amidst the crowd with torches in their hands. And in front was a gray haired, wrinkled leader of theirs who Meghnad knew — Guru Pracheta.

Pracheta was a popular propagator of the Brahmanical religion that followed the old ways of Illavarti worshipping the likes of Lord Shiva, Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu. But not only did Pracheta's sect worship the elemental gods, he himself was a spokesperson from the Manav community of Lanka.

And that was a problem.

'What do you object to?' Meghnad asked from the pedestal itself. The crowd didn't jeer anymore.

'Hurting religious sentiments of our community,' Pracheta said, with arched brows even though he didn't have much hair left above his eyes. He seemed like the kind of teacher you wouldn't want to be learning under since he would be so strict and arbitrary. 'That man …' he pointed to Rocana, '… is our god, he at least holds the title of our god … Lord Indra.'

'He's a king!' exclaimed Meghnad. 'He's not a god. A god doesn't get defeated like this.'

'But his title represents godliness!' Pracheta spoke in anger. 'Lord Dashanan had promised us that our religion shall be respected on this island. In fact, he follows one of our gods — Lord Shiva.'

Gritting his teeth, Meghnad looked at Kumbhkaran helplessly. But before Kumbhkaran could say anything, Meghnad said to Pracheta, 'Take it up with him. I don't care. He allowed me to put your god in the middle of the city, so I'm sure he won't really side with you when you tell him about your qualms about this entire scene.'

At that, Pracheta realised he was in a puddle.

Dashanan did everything out of polity. And Meghnad knew he was ready to accept all forms of religion in Lanka, because that would mean less intolerance

leading to less rebellions. It was in the name of peace.

‘Your highness,’ whispered Pracheta, ‘can you first hear us out?’ He came forward, discreetly. ‘We have a proposition then.’

Meghnad leaned forward from the pedestal to hear the old man. ‘State it, Guruji. I’m always ears to a business deal.’

Pracheta seemed desperate as he scanned his surroundings, saying, ‘You need to realise that a lot of Manavs who worship Lord Indra for their rains are horrified by such heresy. And they brought this issue to us. And they will … start a rebellion, if you don’t change this.’

‘Are you trying to threaten me?’ Meghnad clenched his jaw.

‘No, your highness. I’m just saying, you need to be smart about this. Now I know this day is important for you. You won a war singlehandedly, in fact. But what if I say I can give you something more valuable?’

Meghnad raised his brows. ‘I’m listening.’

‘There’s a serum we are developing in Nikumbila.’

Meghnad’s eyes darted towards the grass-capped hills to the south, far from the lava-fuelled volcanoes in its background. ‘A serum?’

‘It’s like Somas. It’s a mixture of all the herbs and plants we have found in Illavarti, the rare kind.’

‘A religious man into science?’ Meghnad grinned.

Pracheta was not happy to be seen as someone influenced by science, but he continued. ‘It’s potent and addictive too. It is good for the regeneration of cells. Your wounds will heal faster. I can tell you all about it if I take you there after all this is over.’

‘And in return I have to say to everyone that I have agreed with you and Indra goes back to Swarg?’

‘Yes, to the public.’

Meghnad was facing a tough dilemma. On one hand, it was his reputation, and on another, it was this powerful serum. He also knew Pracheta could form any kind of medicinal herb he wanted to and Dashanan would not interfere in his innovations and in fact, he promoted them.

‘All right,’ Meghnad nodded, standing on the pedestal when Kumbhkaran closed up on him.

Meghnad told him about the deal with Pracheta and by the end of it, Kumbhkaran said: ‘Don’t do it just for the serum. Do it for your father and for the peace of this city. I suppose he forgot conveniently about the sentiments of our Manav community and it’s not his fault. He has been too busy. We cannot …’ he gestured at Indra’s body, ‘… we cannot do this. It’s wrong. I should have thought of that before. I apologise.’

Meghnad nodded. He didn’t know what he was doing was for the people or for the serum.

But he still did it.

‘Bring him down,’ he ordered his guards and announced to everyone, ‘I am sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but we must be respectful to all religions and it is a shame I wasn’t. In fact, I sorely overlooked other people’s sentiments by being selfish and thinking what made me happy.’

The guards were pulling him down as the crowd was silent, almost disappointed. But Guru Pracheta was smiling, for he had won today.

Meghnad ordered his guards, ‘Send him back to Swarg. Put him on a Vimana and take him.’ He shook his head as he walked down the stairs of the pedestal with Akshaya and Kumbhkaran behind him.

As he came close to the commander of the city who was executing Meghnad’s recent orders, he said to him, whispering almost so no one hears him: ‘Don’t send him back. Kill him in the cell and dispose of his body. No one should know about it though. All right?’

The commander nodded.

Meghnad turned to see his uncle and brother, who were aghast and clearly heard his betrayal to the Manav community. ‘What? A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do, right?’

14. Laxman

‘HELP!’

He heard it.

She did too.

And they exchanged glances.

Laxman narrowed his eyes when the noise came from the forest — the very one in which Raghav had entered to hunt a hare for tonight’s meal.

‘Was that him?’ Sita Maa stood next to Laxman. ‘It’s definitely him.’

It was, most definitely. Laxman had been chopping wood which would be used in building a new cottage for themselves. But he knew he had to go in the woods.

But then Sita Maa began sprinting towards the jungle. Laxman grasped her by the arm and she stopped, snarling at him. ‘What! We need to help him.’

‘I know, I know. But Raghav cannot afford to lose you.’

Sita Maa arched her brows. ‘I won’t be lost. But if we don’t do anything right now, he will be.’ Laxman contemplated, while Sita scolded him. ‘If he dies, it’ll be on you!’ Her wide, kohl-lined eyes petrified him. Laxman could feel the poison in her words.

‘I’ll go.’ Laxman was stuck with the dilemma of whether he should listen to his brother who told him to stay with Sita Maa or he should let his duty go astray and go help his brother.

Sita clenched her jaw. Laxman could see that she didn’t want to be at this place, but rather in the woods, protecting her husband. ‘I can be of help as well.’

‘I know you can. But if there are Rakshasas …’ and Laxman continued to display his argument’s justification when they heard it again —

‘LAXMAN! HELP!’

Laxman’s heart leapt from his mouth. Sweat beads trickled down from his forehead.

‘I don’t want my husband to die because of you!’ And she began to move forward, not listening to Laxman.

‘At least stay close to me, while we are inside the woods,’

Sita Maa obliged, holding his hand while Laxman led the way. There was growing bitterness between them. Sita Maa didn't like Laxman much. Probably because he left Urmila's side, who was Sita's sister, to join his brother during his exile.

'As a brother, it was not your duty to follow him. As a husband, your duty was to stay with my sister. If you cannot do such a simple thing, then I don't know if we can even trust you with us — for you are a man who runs away from the simple duties that he's assigned to and does what he pleases instead of doing what he's supposed to.'

These words of hers still stung Laxman.

The woods grew dark and dense. The mist grew overpowering by the minute. Dusk was settling as the glimpses of the orange sun vanished, while they walked further.

'RAGHAV!' Laxman yelled.

But there was no response.

'Oh god,' Sita Maa burst into tears, afraid. 'Oh god, I hope he's alive.'

'He's fine, my lady. He will be.'

'Let's hope.'

'Just don't leave me. No matter what.' He looked at Sita Maa and she had an uneven expression of self-doubt towards her brother-in-law.

I can't even make her trust me. Great!

That was when he heard it, as the sun-dried leaves crunched under his feet. It was the sound of a turbulent roar — the roar of Rakshasas.

And instantly leaping out the forest clearing came dozens of Rakshasas with their black skin, with oiled hair and white paste lines over their forehead, indicating their devotion towards Lord Shiva. But their weapons were made of bronze, much better than the primitive nature of Laxman's bow and arrow and Sita Maa's sickle.

The Rakshasas crowded around them, in a circle with their blades shining under the dim sky. And in the middle of them, was a lanky figure, a young boy with a trident in his hand, short in height but royal in nature, adorned with rich jewels.

'Let her go. We don't need her.' The boy said. 'You, on the other hand, must be put to rest for hurting Uncle Khara.'

Laxman didn't respond. Instead, he took the chunni Sita Maa wore and tied one end to his waist, while the other end was tied to Sita Maa's waist, so they were huddled together. 'She stays with me. Where is Raghav?'

'He's being dealt with,' the boy said, impassively.

Laxman could hear Sita Maa gasp. She was worried for her husband.

‘Where is he?’ She shrieked.

‘HELP!’ Raghav’s voice came from the depth of the woods.

The boy smiled. ‘Well, you got your answer. If you want, you can leave. We don’t want to do anything to you.’

Sita Maa exchanged glances with Laxman, while he said: ‘Don’t, my lady. It’s a trap.’

The tension was growing with each moment. Laxman could feel Sita Maa contemplate, but her decision was final when she heard another —

‘HELP!’

Damn!

‘I have to. I am sorry. My loyalty lies with him. I have to save him,’ Sita Maa cocked her head sadly and then broke the knot apart that tied them together, before rushing away from the scene. The Rakshasas groaned as she passed them but the Rakshas boy said, ‘Let her go.’

Laxman was alone now and the Rakshasas were coming in close to him. The boy, on the other hand, smiled.

‘You wanted this, didn’t you?’ Laxman clenched his jaw.

‘Of course.’ The boy said. ‘Separating you and her was important. Father wanted to meet her … personally.’

Father?

‘Who is your father?’

‘You must have heard of him. Raavan.’

A chill ran down his spine. The infamous king of Lanka. The demon feared by the Manavs.

‘Oh, and where are my manners? I’m Atikaya, the second youngest boy of Lord Dashanan, the Raavan.’ Atikaya smiled. ‘And I’ve been ordered to kill you,’ he politely added.

Laxman instantly pulled out three arrows and turned around, shooting three Rakshasas in succession. As other Rakshasas began to approach, he leapt towards the trees.

Grabbing hold of the branches, he made his way to the top, and balancing himself he pulled out his arrows and released the torrent on Atikaya’s men.

But Atikaya was smart.

He ordered his men to throw weapons at him.

And they did — blades were being swung towards Laxman, as Laxman dodged them, by jumping from one branch to another. Whatever he had learnt back in Gurukul about acrobatics, he was using them here until …

His feet missed a log and he slipped. The slip was hard as he instantly lost his balance and fell on the ground.

As he tried to come on his feet, he saw something.

A trident soared through the air and pierced him!

A searing, jolting pain ran through his body as the trident plunged inside his chest, pinning him to the ground. He saw Atikaya walking casually towards Laxman and pulling out the trident as Laxman leaned against the trunk, breathing scarcely.

Blood was trickling and he could feel his life ebbing away.

'You must not know your numbers. We are too many, while you … you are just one.'

Laxman saw something from the corner of his eyes. And he knew what it was. Grinning to himself with exhaustion, he said: 'No … not *one* .'

'What do you mean?' Atikaya arched his brows.

And then instantly it rained arrows from the sky. They were so rapid, and were hurtling with such tremendous force at the Rakshasas that they scampered and tried to figure out where it was coming from.

The wind rustled and jumping from the clearing — it was Lord Raghav.

He had his symbol gleaming under the little light of the wood as he shot more arrows, hurting the Rakshasas one after another.

Atikaya was shocked and Laxman, in his desperate state could see Atikaya … *frightened.*

With ease, the Avatar of Vishnu was hunting the Rakshasas to the point that Atikaya knew, his numbers reduced by half.

'Retreat! Retreat!'

He's smart. He knows when to surrender.

Atikaya instantly made a run with the dozen or so surviving Rakshasas, as they escaped in the darkness of the woods leaving behind the corpses of their race with blood splattered across the dusty fields.

Raghav instantly sprinted to Laxman and knelt beside him. 'Brother, you are too wounded …'

'I'll be fine.' Laxman groaned. *I don't think so.* 'Where is Sita Maa?'

'She was with you.'

'No, she heard you calling out for help and she went in that direction.'

'I didn't call for help,' Raghav gritted his teeth. 'It was that damn Vidhyadhara. I was hunting a hare when this old man came. He started making small talk and then left. Perhaps he copied my voice. You know how the Vidhyadharas are? They are good at mimicry. When I heard my own voice from the woods multiple times, I followed it and found him, but it was too late. We had a fight and I killed him after learning he was from Dashanan's army. After that, I came here. I didn't find Sita on the way.'

‘Unless … someone caught on to her, on the way,’ Laxman stamped his fist on the ground. ‘We got manipulated. Atikaya said that he wanted to separate me and Sita Maa because …’

And then they both heard it. The roaring engines of a machine. But it didn’t come from the ground. It came from above.

And they both saw the Vimana and on the Vimana, they saw the figure, a shadow of a man.

And a woman.

Raghav with his shocked, horrific expression shared a glance with Laxman as they both realised what was going on — Sita Maa had just been abducted.

15. Meghnad

‘What’s there in Naaglok?’ asked Meghnad, recalling the discussion that was cut midway.

They had reached the insides of the Nikumbila Hills, which had terraces of green pastures, with purplish trees and thorny vines that hung lopsidedly from the overgrown canopies. The autumn leaves on the ground were lacing the dusty floors of the land which ascended, in progressive tiers, all the way up to the granite temples.

The slabs outside were rocky and the temple had shiny orbs, made from the glass stones. There was an overpowering scent of dead leaves interspersed with the sound of chirping birds in the background.

‘Important stuff. Your father believes we seriously need an ally in the wake of Bharat’s terror,’ Kumbhkaran said.

Meghnad twirled his moustache from both ends, as he said, ‘From Ananth? That man has always been neutral. Nagas always had an issue taking sides in a war. You know that.’

‘We offered him an alternative,’ Kumbhkaran said. ‘But you probably won’t like it.’

Meghnad narrowed his eyes and wanted to ask what the alternative was when Guru Pracheta said loudly, ‘We have reached.’ He and his men from the religious sect had taken Meghnad, Kumbhkaran and Akshaya to an ancient temple, whose grandeur seemed lost now.

Meghnad had not travelled to this part of the Lanka, but now he wished he had earlier. It was far from the main city and overlooked the volcanoes, adjacent to a small valley where the pristine blue water trailed off.

‘Great. And how is this magnificent architecture the source of our serum?’ Meghnad asked.

‘The serum is made inside,’ Pracheta said, gesturing them to follow.

Meghnad reached the gates from where he saw the cloaked guards standing. And they were not royal guards, but from the sect itself — bald with huge torsos, guards who had the gall of stopping them from entering.

‘What?’ Meghnad turned to Pracheta.

‘Your brother. He carries a weapon,’ Pracheta gestured to Akshaya who was carrying a bow and arrow.

‘So?’

‘The temple doesn’t allow weapons inside, no matter what.’

‘You do realise this is our land? You can’t dictate your ridiculous …’ Meghnad trailed off when Kumbhkaran nudged him, eyeing him angrily. ‘Fine, fine. Akshaya, please do the needful.’

Akshaya reluctantly handed his quiver and bow to the guardsman.

Then, they entered the site.

They were greeted by a large number of fire torches burning across the walls of the temple, till the top which had a strange, visceral design that cast an infernal shadow on them. Men in white cloaks walked like monks and studied the ancient scriptures of Brahmanism. And in between all of that, stood a large statue of a strange woman holding a trishul, a severed head, with multiple hands and lashed her tongue at the onlookers. The statue was made of bronze.

‘We have many such marvels across Lanka in the temples your father has allowed us to build,’ Pracheta said. ‘This is Goddess Kali. Her blessings of strength are bestowed upon all of us.’

There were so many gods in Brahmanical religion that it was close to impossible to point at one.

‘Indeed,’ Meghnad shrugged. ‘Am I supposed to be impressed by this? I would really want to see the serum now rather than all of this … stuff.’

Pracheta was disappointed by Meghnad’s demeanour, but Meghnad could care less. For him, it was simple.

Go straight to the point rather than wavering here and there.

Pracheta gestured at one of his priests to bring it. Meghnad whistled, twirling his moustache as the priest returned with a casket in which a strange tube rested, cushioned amidst the feathers. It bore the colour red.

‘We call it the Kali’s Blood because of the colour and because of where it is made,’ Pracheta said.

Meghnad went to touch it with lustful hands, when Pracheta instantly slapped his hands away.

‘How dare you …’ Meghnad grunted when Kumbhkaran nudged him again.

For the sake of bloody …

Meghnad sighed, controlling his anger again. ‘What?’ He spat.

‘You can’t touch it, of course. This is just for the eyes, so that you believe what we promised you,’ Pracheta explained.

‘Why can’t I touch it?’

‘Because you need to perform a yagna before that, a prayer so to speak,’ Pracheta said gesturing to a pillow that rested opposite to the statue, ‘to receive this blessing of hers.’ Then he gestured back at the serum. ‘Mind you, we haven’t tested this enough. What we do know is that once you have it, you need to have it continuously after you succumb to injuries or before you go to war, for it peaks your adrenaline and gives you the strength you need, something like what Soma does. But unlike Soma, Kali’s Blood once taken, has to be constantly taken, because if not, there are withdrawal symptoms.’

Kumbhkaran intervened, ‘What kind?’

‘Imagine you go to a war, taking this. Your energy will be at a supreme level, almost godly. You will perform impossible feats of strength, as much as you are capable of. But then, once the war is over, you won’t have your energy left, not even the little you have currently because you are burning it out in large quantities, because of the serum. So to constantly remain at full velocity, you need to keep taking it otherwise you will grow really weak by the next war. You will always need this serum. It’s a blessing …’ Pracheta shook his head with dismay. ‘And a curse since you’ll be operating on extremes — I doubt that you would like to be weakened.’

Meghnad knew nothing comes without a price. Everything in this world had a positive, and undoubtedly, a negative side.

But he didn’t like one thing.

‘Why do I have to do the yagna?’

‘Because you’ll be taking this serum with the blessings of Goddess Kali as it is made under her.’

‘But I won’t do that,’ Meghnad looked at the statue. ‘That’s a piece of rock for me. And worse, it’s a piece of rock of a *woman.* ’

Pracheta closed the casket. ‘And I presume, you don’t respect women.’

‘If they did anything remotely respectful, I would. I would love to respect them, but you see, they are nothing but whores and child-bearers and housewives,’ Meghnad shrugged.

Akshaya, at that intervened, ‘D-d-dada, maa is not l-l-like that.’

Meghnad had totally forgotten that he had a naive child with him. He turned to Akshaya saying, ‘But has she ever conquered lands, my dear?’

Akshaya shook his head meekly.

‘Or defeated an army?’

He was tight-lipped.

‘Mother didn’t do anything productive other than giving birth to us — three male children. *Male.* If we had a woman amongst us, she wouldn’t be ruling with Father today.’ Meghnad looked at Kumbhkaran, who didn’t speak much,

but rubbed his nose, shyly. ‘Yes, so,’ Meghnad turned to Pracheta, ‘I wouldn’t kneel down before a woman.’

‘But this is not a woman! She’s our goddess!’ Pracheta exclaimed.

‘A woman goddess?’ Meghnad chuckled. ‘What has she ever even done for the community except for … dear … look at her tongue, scaring children?’

‘How dare you!’ Pracheta said. ‘We can list out all the demons she has devoured …’

Meghnad put up his hand. ‘Sure, lovely. Thank you very much. We would like to know. But the serum seems quite interesting. So, I would like it now …’ he reached out for it.

But Pracheta slapped his hand off again.

‘You need to stop that,’ Meghnad gritted his teeth, as he grabbed hold of Pracheta’s throat and lifted him off the ground. ‘Give it … TO ME.’

Pracheta began to choke, his eyes bulged out, with his nerves throbbing across the side of his wrinkled face.

And at that instance, Meghnad felt a surging pain. Someone had punched him. He left his grip on Pracheta’s throat and he felt hands grabbing hold of his tough, muscular body and pushing him out of the temple, throwing him down, on the ground as dust spiraled around him.

Meghnad dusted his clothes, as he came onto his feet. Kumbhkaran and Akshaya followed him and squared next to him, as Meghnad yelled loudly: ‘You can’t do this. I’ll bring my army and destroy each one of you.’ But no one was listening. The priests went inside, closing the gates on Meghnad’s face.

Kumbhkaran coughed.

‘What?’ Meghnad spat.

‘You can’t do anything to them. The laws of the land protect their religion and they can have as many rules as they want, and you have to abide by it,’ Kumbhkaran added.

‘How can Father make such rules?’ Meghnad shook his head in disappointment.

‘He’s a good ruler, kid. You know that.’

Meghnad bit his tongue, as he twirled his moustache. *I know.*

‘And even if you attack them, they have every right to kill you and Dashanan wouldn’t do anything because …’ Kumbhkaran didn’t have to end as Meghnad knew the reason.

If you die, you die because of your karma. And it is your mistake. Vengeance is nothing but a fool’s errand.

Indeed.

Meghnad sighed. ‘So I didn’t get the serum and I let go of Indra?’

‘C-c-correction,’ stammered Akshaya, ‘you k-k-killed him.’

Meghnad smiled. He liked to be corrected about these things. ‘Well, you win some, you lose some. But I will have that serum, for sure.’

‘You will, kid,’ Kumbhkaran patted him on the shoulder, ‘but you have far more important issues to deal with before that.’

‘Naaglok,’ he breathed.

‘Yes.’

‘But may I ask the reason behind going to that godforsaken place?’ Meghnad recalled what Kumbhkaran had said.

The giant Rakshas sighed, as he said, ‘Well, because Lord Ananth, the Nagraj of Naaglok, has agreed to ally with us and give us his armies and his resources on one condition. And your father believes *you* need to comply with that condition, without any protest.’

‘My compliance?’ Meghnad did not like the sound of it. ‘Why just me?’

Kumbhkaran shrugged. ‘Well, because it deals with you marrying the princess of Naaglok.’

‘A marriage?’ Meghnad frowned. ‘My marriage?’

And at that, Akshaya burst out laughing.

16. Suparnika

‘He’s not dead. Your plan failed,’ Kumbini said, after knocking on the door.

Meenakshi was reading a book when she said it and for a moment, her heart stopped a beat.

No.

This creates an issue.

It becomes worse.

‘What about that princess?’

‘He has kidnapped her,’ Kumbini said as she clasped her hands, anxious. ‘She’s in the guest room with him. He’s trying to talk to her. Perhaps.’

No.

That girl would end up revealing that I gave her the ruby.

She instantly came on her feet, after she turned the page she was reading. She realised she was spoiling the page by doing it in haste, and unturned it. She put a leaf in between and left her room, with Kumbini by her side.

‘Why isn’t he dead?’ She snarled at her handmaiden.

‘Because he planned it well, my lady.’

‘Of course, he did.’ Meenakshi had underestimated her brother. *Damn the gods!*

She had to think of a plan quickly.

She made her way across the dimly lit corridors before reaching the guest room pointed out by Kumbini who had been spying on the Vimana landings in the city as directed by Meenakshi. And before she could knock on the door, she saw Dashanan exiting, his face glum and hidden in shadows.

He shared a glance with Meenakshi before leaving her sight.

Has she told him?

She swallowed a lump in her throat and decided to open the door and meet Sita, but then, it would be counterproductive. She must try talking to her brother. She ordered Kumbini to stay behind while she followed Dashanan who went to the conference room. There was a large oak-wood table in between, with chairs for the city ministers to discuss plans and its implementations.

Meenakshi entered the room to see Dashanan in the corner, pouring himself a wine in his goblet. His expression remained unclear with his back facing her.

‘She told me something.’ He said, aware of Meenakshi’s presence.

Her pulse was beating fast and she could feel her heartbeat growing faint.

I can’t be caught. No.

‘What?’ Meenakshi felt her voice squeak, but she cleared her throat by coughing a little.

‘That I’m the most despicable man she’s ever met,’ Dashanan sat on his chair, the goblet dangling from his thick fingers. ‘Am I? Perhaps she’ll change her opinion about me when I tell her that I’m her father.’

He hasn’t told her. I’m still in the clear.

‘You can’t.’ Meenakshi instantly walked to her brother, sitting in the closest chair to him.

He arched his brows. ‘What do you mean I can’t? She’s my daughter. She has the family heirloom around her throat.’

‘You can’t because …’ Meenakshi knew if he told her that he’s her father because she holds the heirloom, Sita would clarify that it was given by Meenakshi herself. ‘Because, she will not believe it.’

Dashanan was a handsome man — sharp features, a concrete jawline, thin brows and a perfectly sculpted beard. He had long wavy hair brushed towards the back. Meghnad was the closest in appearance to Dashanan, but rather than a beard, he had a moustache, twirled in the corners as if he oiled it perfectly.

‘You’re right. She hates me right now,’ Dashanan sipped his drink.

‘Why didn’t you tell her though? Right now?’ Meenakshi was curious.

‘I was afraid.’ An insurmountable sadness washed over Dashanan’s face. ‘I was afraid, she would reject me.’ He leaned forward. ‘I’m scared, my dear sister. The man my enemies call Raavan is afraid of being rejected by his daughter who he had left close to the furrows long time back because he thought she died.’ And he began to shed tears.

For a moment, Meenakshi could feel him. She allowed him to come forward and hug her, as he tightly cupped her face, while Meenakshi ran her fingers down his hair.

She felt sorry for him.

Am I doing the right thing?

But then Vidhyut’s face came in front of her — he was bloody and was crying. And over him stood Dashanan. And without even letting him say his last words, Meenakshi’s own brother killed the man she loved.

And she fought back her sisterly feelings towards Dashanan as she said, ‘Give her some time.’

‘My dear, the only thing I don’t have is time. Every day, my life is at risk.’ He pulled back. ‘Raghav was a challenge. He defeated Mariachi and even Atikaya’s men. It is a wonder my son is safe. He’s going to be a problem, down the road.’ He shook his head. ‘I narrowly escaped him but I have a feeling I will see him again soon. As of now, I have to focus on bigger issues and that is Bharat. He’s forging important allies, secret ones which my spies tell me.’

Meenakshi nodded. *You were not supposed to live.* ‘Show her the Rakshas culture. Show her that we are not the enemies she thinks we are, that we are not beasts. And then, reveal it to her. Take your time. Hastiness is not the key. And before you tell her, consult me. I’m someone’s daughter too. I know exactly how to handle this.’

Dashanan smiled as he cupped her face with his burly palms. ‘Thank you for being here. I don’t know what I’ll do without you. Mandodari will create a fuss. She’s impatient, you know.’

‘And it’s understandable why, but she should wait. Believe me.’

Dashanan agreed by nodding his head. ‘All right. But I can’t stay here in Janasthan. I have to leave for Lanka. I’ll take Sita with me. It’ll give her the opportunity to see the other side of things — that Rakshasas are noble too, that they are good men. Heroes. And not just beasts as the Manav writers portray us to be. Do you know how we are termed by the poets in Bharat’s kingdom?’

Meenakshi shook her head.

‘I’m considered the ten-headed demon,’ he laughed, showing off his pearls he was gifted as a child, which he wore around his neck. It had a reflection of his face which was divided into ten pearls, so it looked like he had ten heads. ‘And you as an ugly demoness witch.’

‘But I don’t even practice Maya,’ She laughed.

He joined in as well.

‘But about the ugliness, they are not wrong.’ Meenakshi added. ‘Our grandfather reminded me of that. How dark I was, born with these,’ she signaled at her squint eyes.

‘Sumali was crazy to see ugliness in beauty,’ corrected Dashanan, smiling at his sister. ‘Ironically though, you were the one who took care of him when he got sick.’

Meenakshi didn’t say anything, but rather patted his back. She was thinking of leaving when Dashanan asked: ‘Are you coming with us to Lanka?’

Meenakshi thought.

A new plan was cropping up in her mind. ‘No.’

‘Are you sure? I want you and Meghnad to meet again, sort out the differences you had earlier.’

Meenakshi thought for a moment. She *did* have differences with Dashanan's oldest son, especially by the end of their relationship before she left for Janasthan to be the queen there. But she had her mind running with more schemes, more politics against the Rakshas tribe. She knew what she had to do now — meet Raghav again.

And direct him to Lanka.

But for that, she had to be here rather than there.

'Yes, I'm positive. I just realised I have some work pending,' She smiled. 'It's very important work.'

17. Meghnad

Akshaya was leaving.

Meghnad saw him packing his bag in his room. A trunk filled with all sorts of clothes, jewellery and weapons in different shapes and sizes.

I'm going to get married.

The thought frightened him. He always saw himself as a bachelor. But he knew why he was marrying — it was for the alliance. That was a priority for his empire.

Deep down, Meghnad knew he was afraid of love. He was afraid of commitment, tied to one person. It was as if someone was choking him.

But it's just for the alliance.

He pacified himself.

'Best of luck, brother,' said Meghnad with a grin, as he held the bamboo carved bow. He had thought of building it for him before he left for Vali's kingdom.

Akshaya turned and he said softly, 'L-l-look who's here. The married m-m-man.'

'Not yet, okay?' Meghnad frowned, as he tousled his brother's hair. 'Stop messing with me.'

Akshaya chuckled in return. The room was thinly decorated with wooden toys in the corner, portraits of the entire family and books stacked on the study table. Akshaya was always the person who wanted to be good at everything. It was a way for him to fill the gap for his stammer since he thought he was the weakest one in the family.

But Meghnad knew his secret. He was a fine singer and that was when his stammer wouldn't come in between. But he had stopped singing — at least since the continuous conquests by Dashanan across Illavarti. Because he had to be a part of it, as a dutiful son. It was a way for him to be normal.

'Well, I bought you something.' Meghnad showed him the bow. 'It has your initials. AK. Akshaya Kumara.'

Akshaya looked at it in bewilderment. 'W-wow. You never g-gift anything,

dada.’

‘I’m not a miser, you moron.’ Meghnad sat on his comfy bed. ‘This is your first time alone, right?’

Akshaya meekly nodded.

Meghnad had recalled the dark time Akshaya had gotten a stroke. It had come out of nowhere. And ever since then, he had this problem of speaking. After that, people didn’t take him seriously. He was the son of the most feared ruler in the country and he couldn’t *speak.* And to compensate for his disability, he went out with his brothers more, fighting and learning the craft of archery.

All of it was to prove his potential. That he wasn’t any less.

But for Meghnad, it didn’t matter. He was his brother. Stammer or no stammer, he was one fine lad.

‘Sit with me,’ he grabbed him and made him comfy next to him. Akshaya looked up, like he always did to Meghnad. ‘You are going alone to Kishkindha and honestly, Vali is a bit of a maverick.’

‘I-I know.’ He nodded.

‘Good. And do what I do, okay?’

‘P-plan.’

‘Yes. And execute. Don’t forget to execute the plan. You have to go forward and kill. There is no better defense than offence.’

Akshaya smiled. ‘I’ll b-be like you. Just l-l-like you. Y-you always manage to escape at the n-n-nick of time. You are one of the s-s-strongest warriors I’ve e-ever seen.’

‘I don’t like this.’

‘What?’ He got confused.

‘This emotional bonding. It’s too cheesy for me. I hate it,’ Meghnad smiled as he wrapped his arms around Akshaya. ‘And yes, be like me and you’ll stay alive. And don’t surrender. Never do that. Be daring. And don’t have that bloody moral consciousness you had back in Amravati. We are in a world of war and death. To survive, we need to kill others. At. Any. Cost. All right?’

Akshaya nodded mutely.

Meghnad ruffled his head as he moved towards the door. But before going, he turned his head back and said to Akshaya: ‘Write letters and keep informing me. I’ll be at Naaglok. You can send ravens there.’

‘O-okay.’

‘Great.’

‘Dada?’

Meghnad hummed. ‘Hmm?’

‘Have you really agreed to the marriage?’

Meghnad sighed. ‘I don’t know. It’s for the alliance. You know that.’ He was getting disgusted by thinking about even being tied to one person.

‘Can I be honest, d-dada?’

Meghnad nodded.

‘I would l-l-like to see you …’ Akshaya began, ‘… i-in a knot. It’ll be g-g-good for you. I w-w-wish I was there.’ He smiled.

‘Thank goodness, you aren’t. It’ll save me some embarrassment.’ He smiled. ‘But you are right. I hope you are right, I mean. I hope the girl is bearable.’

‘What is her name?’

‘Someone called …’

18. Prameela

‘Your father has a message for you.’

Prameela was in her palace’s courtyard, donating the kitchen food to the poor who stood in line, when the messenger had arrived and her interest was piqued.

What was it?

And before she could ask the messenger, the messenger added: ‘He wants to meet you in his room’s balcony.’

‘Of course.’

Prameela saw the messenger depart when she directed her attention to the queue of poor men, women and children of Naaglok in scorched clothes, waiting for the food that she was pulling out from the bag. Prameela, ever since she was a small child, despite the luxuries of royalty, saw the disdain of upper class and lower class in every society. The class difference was something that Prameela despised and to narrow that, she would do her best to uplift the lower class — feeding them, paying the noble tutors to help the poor students from her pocket. The list would go on.

Her philanthropy was noticed by her father who had remarked that she was very much like her late mother. Someone with empathy, with love for those she didn’t know.

And it was a shame. Prameela’s mother was not in this world anymore.

She was very small when it had happened. She had seen her mother struggle through her heart illness for the longest time to learn that death comes to those who are good-hearted. And every day while Prameela remained invested in her philanthropic activities, she was cheating death. It was a way of winning life and saying: ‘You can’t kill me.’

Once she realised that more people were joining in, she handed the bag of food to her guards and her half -sister, Anjani — a lanky Naga princess, from her stepmother. She was young, half of Prameela’s age, but was taller than Prameela.

Prameela walked inside the palace, as her eyes darted on the beautiful ceilings of her city. Naaglok, unlike other cities, wasn’t in the open. It had multiple

entrances and was situated under the earth. An entire city was built with large, canvassing bright golden lights in a cave-like structure.

But that didn't mean that water was scarce. In fact, streams of ravines were attached to pipes that ran through the city, under the marble floors. The smell was not of rocks and moulds, but rather of tulips and lavender. Prameela hadn't ventured outside of Naaglok, but she knew Naaglok was more organised than any other city out there.

She walked inside the terraces of her palace, with guards with serpent engraved breastplates standing watch under the vigilant shadows of the torches that lined the staircases. She moved upstairs and passed the rooms where her other sisters and brothers lived, her cousins and aunts and uncles, until she reached her father's room.

She opened the door after knocking and walked to the balcony where she saw the Shesh Naag temple afar, brightly gazing back at the palace. It had a long serpent sculpture — a cobra and instead of having nothing in the mouth, it had a large Mani — a sapphire stone, mined from the very earth they lived in.

And the Manis were a sight to behold — stones of rare quality that were then used for beautification and, in fact, the entire upper echelon of the city had Manis casually put up in their houses, as a source of religious purity and to show their status.

She saw Lord Ananth, the Nagraj of Naaglok, with his hands at the back, with jet black hair and a tummy over which a white cloak covered his body. Ananth turned his head at Prameela's presence, he hugged her and said, 'Something has come up.'

The tone of his voice was worrying her. But she had already heard rumours. And Anjani was one of its carriers.

'You are getting married. I heard Mum speaking to Dad about it. They are quite excited.'

When she had heard it, she took some time to digest this fact, and really didn't believe it. All her life, she had two things to worry about — education and marriage. Ever since her childhood, it was about her and how she would plan and decorate her wedding. Because she loved the idea of this institution, of never giving up on your partner, no matter what.

And she had felt butterflies in her stomach. A smile danced on her lips. But after that rumour was passed, things died down. Nothing was heard from her father or her step-mother but now …

Finally he had called her.

'Yes, Father?' Prameela softly said, struggling not to smile when her head turned to see the black cloaked man standing in the corner, whom she had

overlooked earlier.

He had a glass eye, with a bald head and a sunken face. But there was something very peculiar about him for he seemed genderless.

And she knew why, since he was a eunuch — Lord Kaliya, the minister of cultural affairs, and a confidante to Ananth.

Why was HE here?

But she ignored it, even though Kaliya always unnerved her with his disarming smile, his cheeky look and his glass eye which spoke volumes about his devious activities. He was the mastermind behind apprehending a number of rebels that plotted against her father and for that she was grateful, but she was intuitive enough to believe the rebellions were created by Kaliya himself to gain the trust of the Nagraj.

But she had no evidence to prove that. She could only trust her woman's intuition and she knew how much a woman's voice was heard of or spoken in any city.

'The Rakshasas are on their way. Their prince, the infamous defeater of Lord Indra is coming here to marry you.'

She was silent for a while. She had heard she was getting married, but not to whom. And hearing Rakshasas was an instant dismay to her because she had heard how cruel and misogynistic they were in the community unlike the Nagas who promoted equality. 'He defeated Lord Indra?'

'Yes. A champion of all champions. A sorcerer. His name is Meghnad.'

A chill ran down her spine. Oh, she had heard of him. The malicious son of Raavan, so handsome that women fell prey to his looks but not to his black heart, which was violent and the gods only knew what else.

'Do you know of him?' Lord Kaliya with his slithering, whispering tone asked. He had a distinct, male-female voice.

'Of course. I don't travel but I make sure I'm aware of what's happening in the country.' She sharply snarled at Kaliya, then turned to her father. 'And why do you think he's my ideal suitor?'

'He's not, my dear. But you see, you have to do it for the sake of our country.' Ananth leaned forward on the ornate railings.

'An alliance?'

'Yes.' He said. 'Rakshasas are the supreme Tribe for now. They have occupied almost all of Illavarti. They have allies with Vali and if we won't ally with them, they will rally against us and wage battles. And you know, we don't have the resources for a war. We have always been …'

'Silent.' Prameela added, recalling the history she studied in the libraries.

'And we believe,' Kaliya said, 'that this alliance can merge two powerful

states against one — Ayodhya. But my dear, please assure us, that when you meet the prince of Lanka, you need to tell him how eager we are for this marriage. He should see through our desperation because we are.'

Prameela remained quiet. She didn't answer to Kaliya for he was non-existent as of now. 'What if I don't like him?'

Ananth had no response.

'So I'm supposed to marry someone I don't even know?' She spat it out, but her voice was still composed, for she was always taught to be respectful to her elders, no matter how mad they were in their actions.

'We will give you enough time to know each other.' Kaliya said.

'CAN I TALK TO MY FATHER INSTEAD OF YOU?' snarled Prameela at the minister who instantly gasped in shock and remained silent.

'Apologies, my lady. I meant no disrespect.'

Ananth patted her on the shoulder and then looked at Kaliya. 'Just give us some time.'

Kaliya nodded, leaving the room, as he closed the balcony doors. Prameela was apologetic for a moment, but she waited for Ananth to say something, who was just sighing.

'Please try to understand, what I'm doing is for the good of this state.' He said, his voice defeated. 'We are in the middle of a cross-fire, my dear. And we need your help. You need to gain the prince's trust.'

Prameela reluctantly nodded when Ananth looked up, his crystal eyes blinking at her. 'Remember the time, when you were kidnapped as a child by the rebels of this state and I did everything to save you? I even stepped down from kingship to save you, my child, but they were caught. You are my precious …' he cupped his hand around her chin, 'and I would never do something to hurt you. This marriage, it's important, but I promise you, you won't be hurt in all of this.'

'All right, I trust you.' She meekly smiled. 'I hope Meghnad is better than his reputation.'

Ananth laughed. 'I can't be sure about that. But I've seen you change bad men into good. Perhaps you shall do that here as well.'

Prameela could only be hopeful. She hugged her father, when he whispered in her ears: 'And trust Kaliya. Just do what he says.'

Prameela didn't understand his words, when she pulled back. She went out of the balcony and in the room, in the dark, stood Kaliya. Prameela shot him a glance and before she could apologise for her outburst, Kaliya himself said: 'My lady, your father doesn't know something, but I have a plan.'

Prameela was quiet.

'I was the one who instigated this ceremony because I need to know what the

Rakshasas have.’

‘What do you mean?’ Prameela narrowed her gaze.

‘Nuclear weapons,’ Kaliya spoke, ‘the ones they used in Amravati and before that too. The reason I told you to bring Meghnad on our side is because … I want him to reveal to you how he makes these weapons, so we can duplicate them. You and I both know Naaglok needs an arsenal of its own. And your father would have absolutely despised this idea for he would never risk your life, so I suggested an alliance as a disguise to carry the motive I had originally planned.’

‘You are manipulating the Nagraj?’

‘It doesn’t matter as long as his daughter is ready to be part of the ploy.’ He came out of the shadows, his feminine features and masculine body defined in the light. ‘Please understand, I respect your father, but you and me … we are working on a single goal: to strengthen Naaglok. And this is one step towards doing that.’ He paused.

‘How can I trust you?’

‘You can’t.’ He smiled. ‘You can only have faith in me because to be honest, it’s either this or losing out an opportunity to actually help Naaglok be a militaristic state against its enemies.’

Prameela clenched her jaw. *I don’t have a choice here.*

‘Also, you have to get the information before the ceremony even commences otherwise this plan will fail and you’ll be married to him.’ He said with disgust. ‘And your father or no one else can know this plan. It’s between us.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I don’t want you to marry that monster,’ Kaliya spoke, shaking his head. ‘The moment we know about the creation of the Astras …’ he smiled deviously. ‘We will assassinate him and blame it on someone else.’

19. Meghnad

His radioactive metre began to flicker.

It had been doing so for a while, ever since they had entered Naaglok. Meghnad had entered the empire of the Nagas with a band of men, with his guards and Kumbhkaran by his side. They were on stallions and Meghnad had a crown on his wavy, long hair as he waved at the Nagas, who watched him in awe.

‘Isn’t he Indrajit?’

‘Wow! He’s so handsome.’

‘Why do people say Rakshasas are demons? Look at him. He’s so beautiful.’

Meghnad even winked at a few girls who just blushed and started murmuring at each other, when Kumbhkaran coughed.

‘Mind I remind you the reason behind travelling here, kid?’ The grumpy, odd nosed general of his state chided.

And that was when he heard the clicking sounds of his metre from his bag that he had wrapped around his belt. He pulled out the compass-shaped device to the Manis that were lined on the dust streets as jewels. And the metre flicked, but not too much. Though it was enough to alert Meghnad that there was definitely something up with the stones the Nagas were using.

‘Chief?’

‘Hmmm?’ Kumbhkaran sighed.

‘I think we have a radioactive element in the city. Though not so potent.’ Meghnad said.

‘Really? That’s something. Our spies never spoke of something like this.’

Meghnad was excited, especially because the trip was no more just about a marriage. It was now about finding the source of these Manis which could be used and mixed with either Chintamani or Somas.

‘What are these stones?’

‘Sapphires, as I might presume, called the Naagmani,’ Kumbhkaran said, ‘but they are mined here.’

‘I am sure that if we find the mine, we might find a potent radioactive

element. Just look at this.' Meghnad showed his metre and Kumbhkaran watched the switch flicking towards the redder shade of the compass, but not too sharply. 'They are modified, burnt and cut after being mined. That's why the radioactivity is fairly less and not lethal …' he pointed at the Manis, '… but the original one, straight from the ground, would *probably* be potent if we get our hands on it.'

In a while they reached the gates of the palace where Ananth — a shoddy looking king with a tummy bigger than his head — greeted them with his favourite minister Kaliya. To be fair, Meghnad had heard about Kaliya. He was neither a man nor a woman. And because of that, Meghnad was deeply unsettled.

As he dismounted from his horse, Kaliya tried to shake hands with him but Meghnad frowned and ignored him. Instead, he embraced Ananth who didn't notice his disgust towards the eunuch, but Kaliya did.

'WE HAVE PREPARED A FEAST! Come, come!'

Meghnad sighed, as he walked along Kumbhkaran, the metre still in his hand as he walked on the glistening, marble floors which had sapphire stones and once again, the metre switch flicked.

And his excitement was reaching its peak.

I can make a new weapon here. A new Astra!

He was beaming as he walked towards the dinner room where a large assortment of people greeted Meghnad, the groom-to-be. He didn't know half of them, but he shook hands, smiled at the subjects and tried his best to look the part of the perfect man, that a woman is supposed to marry. How would they know the pools of blood he was responsible for and the women he had bedded?

A smile will always make it seem normal.

Meghnad sat with Kumbhkaran for dinner. They had to sit on the ground and eat from the leaves rather than from a brass plate. And for Meghnad, it was just tough to sit cross-legged but he had to follow the customs of this land. As fish and chutney was being served, he whispered to Kumbhkaran: 'I believe we can loot them at night. I can go to the mines with some men …'

'He's your father-in-law, kid. You can just ask,' Kumbhkaran shook his head. 'There's an exchange of gifts and you can ask for freshly mined, untouched Naagmanis as your gift. So you don't have to do all the hard work of looting your future wife's family. And I'm sure, they will give it to you since they don't know that it holds such value in creating a weapon.'

Meghnad pursed his lips. His uncle did have a point. After all, he was the guest of honour here.

'But we have to be careful about it. We can't make them suspicious. If they get a whiff that what they possess is nuclear in nature, things could go in the

wrong direction and this alliance will go down for they'll think we came here for, their Manis and not them.' Kumbhkaran quickly added these words as if he didn't want Meghnad to do anything stupid. 'I would suggest you be *sure* that we have a goldmine before we go on a fool's errand and spoil what Dashanan has planned for you.'

'All right, I'll be discreet about it,' Meghnad smiled at Ananth, who was on the other side of the circular human chain that they had made while gobbling the food. 'I'll sneak in tonight to check on their radioactivity levels. If they aren't high, there's no point in even asking them, right? Because we won't be able to make Astras out of them then.'

'The mines are heavily guarded. There's no chance in hell you'll go past them even with our smoke bomb tricks.' Kumbhkaran said since Meghnad knew he had visited Naaglok for diplomatic relations, several times.

And that was when the women of the house entered, one of them wearing Meghnad's favourite sari colour — red. Her face was hidden by her chunni and as she sat, next to her father, she pulled back her chunni and the first thing Meghnad saw was her striking blue eyes, just as clear as the Naagmani. Her fair face was cherubic and her thick hair was in a braid. She had a slightly bent nose and full lips.

And with a lustrous smile, she glanced shyly at Meghnad.

'Is that my wife?'

Kumbhkaran looked up and nodded. 'Don't touch her till the ceremony. Please, for heaven's sake.'

'I had devoured the heavens, chief, if you don't remember.' He chuckled. 'But I can't make any promises. I have a plan now.'

'Ugh, what is it?'

'I know exactly who can help me enter the mines,' Meghnad smiled back at Prameela, who just blushed like a small child. 'Someone from the inside, someone who will do anything to impress me.'

She clearly was in love with him.

'Who?' asked the middle-aged Rakshas.

'Prameela,' he said.

Kumbhkaran watched him incredulously. 'Don't do it.' He widened his gaze. 'That's a bad idea.'

'Don't worry, chief. Look at her.' Meghnad said, as he saw Prameela giggling, catching glances at him. 'She's innocent as a child. I can easily manipulate the girl. I can always lie to her.'

Kumbhkaran sighed. 'If you screw this up, kid, we will be toasted in this city.'

Meghnad knew the stakes, but he also knew how to play with people's

emotions.

And Prameela, from far itself, looked like an easy target.

20. Laxman

They were at the gates of Janasthan.

And Raghav had one motive.

To kill Raavan.

Laxman was mostly the hot-headed one. But after Sita Maa's kidnapping, Raghav was in a state. He was frantic, murmuring to himself and his behaviour was impulsive and erratic. Laxman had to make him pause and think. Really *think.* But Raghav was clear. Janasthan was Rakshas territory.

And probably … Sita Maa would be there.

Without an army, without any aid but only with his brother, Raghav was on his way. Laxman had no option but to follow him.

The trenches ahead of them deepened as they approached the gates close to a long arched bridge which was as wide as the pillars it stood on. Conical towers populated the city with large fortress-like walls, coiling itself like a snake.

'Are you sure about this? We have no one on our side.'

But Raghav didn't respond.

'They have an army, brother. While we … we are just two.'

Raghav was leaning forward, his head cocked ahead, as he had his bow and arrow ready to strike. He had filled his quiver with the leftover arrows from the corpses of the last battle, plus he had an axe he stole as well as a sword that dangled from his hip. Laxman could see his symbol was glinting in the dark and realistically, it was impossible for it to glow, but when it came to Raghav — he wasn't ordinary. He was the Avatar of Vishnu. But even though his strength coupled tens of people, he wouldn't be able to defeat an entire army and to think that he could was being worse than just a hothead.

He was being an idiot.

But Laxman like the diligent brother that he was, followed him and as they reached the bridges, the torrent of water that ran close to the bridge, spiked and hit while thunder struck in the dense clouds. It was a dark day and it was worse when Laxman saw what lay in wait for them.

Instead of the main gates being manned by just a few guards, there was a

complete army formation.

Catapults were lined, archers were steadying from the top of the fortress walls, bridge-men were ready with their blades.

And in the forefront, was Queen Meenakshi.

That woman. The reason behind our misery.

But Laxman saw that Raghav didn't care. In fact, he began shooting arrows. It pierced the Rakshasas close to Meenakshi, who stayed frozen in her place. Raghav kept shooting until a number of Rakshasas fell, but Meenakshi had laid her hand forward to not strike back.

And then Raghav's quiver got over and he was panting with hot rage when he pulled out his blade and sprinted towards Meenakshi.

He's going mad.

And he brought his blade close to Meenakshi's face. The faces of her guards were strained as Meenakshi had commanded them not to attack.

'I can help her. I can help you,' Meenakshi whispered.

'How did you know we were coming?' asked Laxman.

'Because I have spies stationed at the outskirts, who send us a flag in case an enemy approaches. What I saw from my spyglass were you two. That is when I had to come and tell you the truth,' Meenakshi explained with honest eyes.

That was when Raghav stopped. He was frozen in his place, his eyes were wide and bloodshot and that is when Laxman knew he had to control him. He grabbed hold of his brother and made him lower the weapon. He sheathed it for Raghav and said to him, 'Just take a deep breath and see the amount of men she has.'

Raghav turned his head up and Laxman could see what he was seeing — more than hundred archers were stationed on the top, with their fire arrows pointed at him. 'Do you really want to die before saving Sita Maa?' Laxman asked and that calmed him down, a little bit.

'I can help you,' Meenakshi said again.

'We don't need your help, witch,' Laxman said as he put his arms around Raghav.

And they turned to leave when Meenakshi said, 'I know where she is.'

Laxman stopped. Even Raghav did. Meenakshi came forward, separating herself from her army so they couldn't hear her. 'I know where your wife is.'

'Where?' Laxman asked her. Raghav was silent.

'Lanka.'

'So far?' Raghav squeaked. 'It's just been days …'

'You must have seen the flying machine we have. We travel faster than anyone on horseback.' Meenakshi said. 'Listen, both of you, I didn't have any

role in getting Sita abducted. In fact, I tried to stop him but he heard about a beautiful woman from the guards, and my brother — oh, he has a problem with the ladies and he just ventured out to see her. He's a lustful man …'

'Has he touched her?' Raghav asked her, teary eyed. Laxman was seeing how much of a rollercoaster of emotions his brother was undergoing right now.

'No, not until they get married in Lanka,' Meenakshi maintained an impassive expression.

'But she's already …' Laxman protested.

'It doesn't matter to my brother. He's power hungry and devilish,' Meenakshi shook her head. 'I tried to stop him, but he was mad. He had already made up his mind. Oh, what a sad day it was. I apologise, Lord Raghav. I wish I could have done something else.'

Raghav nodded. But Laxman was having a hard time believing her. She couldn't be this innocent. Perhaps … perhaps, she was playing them, but Laxman wanted some proof to justify that statement.

'I can help you.' She said again. 'But it depends whether you want it or not.'

Laxman and Raghav contemplated. But Laxman waited for his brother to speak, who remained silent in the time of crisis. 'How can we trust you?'

'You are exiled from your empire and you have no one except me, who has been nothing but apologetic, grateful, even though Lord Raghav was unkind to me. Have I not?' Meenakshi said with genuineness dripping from her words, an earnestness that perhaps Raghav identified with.

'I don't know what went wrong in my head.' Raghav sighed. 'I … I … why am I here? Am I mad? How could I attack you like this? I risked my brother's life too.' He was on the brink of tears but Meenakshi shook her head.

'Do not be saddened, for today you have to plan. Now, listen carefully. I'm going to set up a meeting with someone who has an army and the right people to help you win this war against Dashanan though we don't know whether he will help you or not, but we will see.' She said. 'Since Lanka is an island and to travel, you'll need ships, you need to ally with them, for they have connections in the southern shore that can help you reach the land and stop Sita from getting married to my brother.'

Laxman arched his brows. 'Why are you helping us?'

'Because I always side with what's right, okay?' Meenakshi sighed. 'Stop doubting the only ally you have. My men …' she turned back to see the suspicious Rakshasas watching them, but unable to hear because the three spoke in whispers, '… have to be lied to. I will inform them I established a treaty with you, otherwise they'll send a message that I'm betraying my empire. But that's my problem. Trust me, okay? Meet me at sundown close to the Rishimukha

Mountains cave entrance. There's only one and you'll see it.'

Raghav asked, 'Who are we meeting?'

'A rebel leader, he has a camp,' she said, as she shared a glance with Laxman, a helpful smile washing on her face, 'He goes by the name of Sugreev, aided by a Vanar general called Hanuman.'

21. Prameela

She had three days.

Three days before the marriage ceremony happened and she had to find out exactly how Meghnad did what he did: create bombs. And if she failed …

She had thought about an alternative. But she couldn't find one. Perhaps it would mean, she had to actually marry the monster and she would be stuck with him for eternity. The thought disgusted her. Because her father wanted an alliance, no matter what and the minister who she despised wanted the bomb plans and the end of Rakshas Empire.

There were two deferring ideologies in the same court and she was caught in the tug-of-war. Her father would not want to mess with this alliance because it would mean messing with Raavan. But if she managed to retrieve the plans and Meghnad was assassinated, Raavan's empire will be crippled. And they would have the resources to build Astras to attack him and save Prameela's sanctity and preserve Naaglok as a rising autonomous state.

So she was not just doing this for herself, but for her people.

Oh god, I was smiling at Raavan's son.

The thought disgusted her but Kaliya had taught her how to disarm the prince, wrap him around her charm. She had to act innocent. She had to act flirtatious, even seductive. And the very idea that Kaliya knew so much about it, begged a question: what else will he teach her? And she didn't want to know since she was exhausted from doing what she had already done.

She was in her room when she heard a knock.

A head peeked in. It was the indistinguishable face of Anjani. 'He's here.'

Prameela straightened her figure. Her bosom was revealing as directed by Kaliya, a thin line of cleavage visible for him to peer into. The very idea she was using her sexuality made her feel like retching but Kaliya prompted her that it was the only way to tame a man, especially someone like Meghnad.

The door slightly opened as she saw the son of Raavan with his long black tunic entering her room. He was bare-chested, with a jewel hanging from his neck. He twirled both sides of his well-oiled moustache as he said: 'You look

beautiful.'

'Thank you.' Prameela said with a seductive smile.

'Uncle and your father wanted us to be acquainted. Now I would have preferred …' he walked to the window. '… a walk in the park, but you … you called me to your room. You are not old-fashioned at all, are you?'

Prameela knew what he was thinking. What every man thinks. But then that's what she wanted him to think: sex controls a lustful man. And Rakshasas were known to be lustful. Prameela walked to Meghnad, the confident, well-odoured warrior and she noticed he was muscular, but not bulky like most Rakshasas out there. In fact, he was a bit lanky and handsome.

'What are you doing?' He asked.

'What you want.' Prameela smiled. 'We are getting married, I thought you wanted to test me, how I'm in bed.'

She hesitatingly touched his chest …

When he held her arms and twisted it towards the back.

Her heart leapt in her mouth. And she widened her gaze in surprise, while Meghnad remained impassive just watching the corners of her mouth.

And then he left her.

She loosened her tight frame as he moved away from her.

I thought he would give in and I would then seduce him to reveal the information.

But he was coming off as a surprise.

'My lady,' he softly began, 'my reputation precedes me. I might be called a womaniser but I'm here to settle down with you. My heart is with you, from the moment I laid my eyes on you. Your body is not my priority even though you want me to make it one.'

Prameela arched her brows. *Is he for real? Can the son of Raavan be actually … good?*

'I apologise for this.' Prameela disdainfully put her head down. 'I thought of you as someone else.'

'Heh,' Meghnad smiled, 'You seem like a bright woman. Tell me, why did you agree to this superfluous marriage?'

I didn't have a choice.

'I liked you.' She lied.

'Really?' He chuckled. 'And what do you like about me?'

Prameela knew this was her opportunity as she walked back to him, her hands tracing his neck, as she said: 'That you are a valiant warrior, an innovator, a man of science and magic …' her fingertips slowly traced his jaw line and she could see his expressions change. 'You are unbeatable. You are a champion. You are a

hero. And I want to be married to one.'

He had closed his eyes by now as Prameela was using her touch to arouse him.

'You smell good, my lady.'

'Only for you, my love,' Prameela was internally gritting her teeth for the lies she had to speak.

But only for my state.

'Tell me something …' she began, '… will you?'

'What?' Meghnad opened his eyes and looked at her soul. And she wished he didn't see the lies.

'I love science and I know the Astras you make, or I've heard you make, is not magic, but science. How do you do it? What is it? I'm very curious.'

Meghnad smiled. 'You really want to know or are you just trying to impress me?'

'No, my love, really, I do.'

Meghnad instantly grabbed her by the waist and pushed her against the wall, his lips coming close to hers, her hair touching his. And now his fingers slowly went to her breasts. 'I can show you how I do it,' he said.

Bingo.

'But can I trust you?' He asked, as he circled his finger around her cleavage.

Prameela slowly moved his finger and directed it to her mouth, as she began to lick it. For a moment, she could see Meghnad's eyes being filled with pure delight and uncontrollable urge to … grab her and throw her on the bed and devour her body. But she stopped, at the right instant for it to go further. 'I'm practically your wife and we both shall be sharing secrets. Why not start somewhere we both are curious about?'

'Point. I love your tongue on my fingers though, my lady.'

'Don't worry, you'll love it somewhere else too.' Prameela deviously grinned. 'But for that, you must trust me.'

Meghnad's smile vanished and his gaze was thoughtful. 'Okay, but for that, you have to help me out.'

'Anything, my love.'

'You need to take me to the mines where Naagmani is dug out.'

Her smile trailed. *What was he getting into?* 'Why?'

'What you want to learn about Astras, I can only show you by combining elements. I have the Soma Stones that I carry and Naagmani can be a good combination to create an Astra.'

'Naagamani is not radioactive,' she said.

'To confirm that, we have to go to the mines, to test it out.'

Prameela wanted to see it happen in reality and it would be good then to teach the scientists of her land the same thing. ‘Father won’t like this. He doesn’t let outsiders enter the sacred mines.’

‘I’m your husband.’

Prameela knew she had to secretly get inside the mines without getting caught by her father otherwise he’d know what she and Kaliya were up to.

‘All right, let’s go,’ she declared.

22. Meghnad

That was excruciating.

Meghnad had underestimated Prameela, but boy! She was controlling him. And how did she even do it? There was a deep, tireless energy about her, something that attracted and challenged him. It was always him who would control the women, but for now, it was different.

Prameela was holding him by the neck and he had to concentrate to remind himself what he was supposed to ask from her.

But no matter what, he was able to get what he wanted from her and it had been successful.

As of now, they were on their way to the mines. Their bodies were hidden under cloaks in order to stay undetected. She had taken the help of the creepy eunuch, Kaliya, who managed to get them a cart and disguises to hide themselves from the people's eyes. A guard under Kaliya's command drove them while they remained quiet, inside the shadows of their vehicle.

Prameela was quiet, thoughtful. And Meghnad couldn't get a sense of who she was. She claimed to be naive, but then her seduction would make the hair at the nape of his neck stand up.

She was a mystery. And just because of that, I have to be careful.

She can be manipulative and Meghnad had always learnt to trust his instincts more than anyone else except his father.

He would follow his father blindly.

'Stop,' she said to the guard.

'Have we reached?' Meghnad asked, but when he turned his head, he saw they were in the middle of a street.

'No, hold on,' she said, as she came out of the cart, her face concealed in the hood. Meghnad peered outside to see her walking to a beggar, kneeling down and handing out two gold coins for some reason. The beggar touched her feet but she modestly pulled herself back to not be worshipped for something like this.

And then she walked back to the cart and settled herself. 'Let's go.'

The cart began to move and Meghnad looked at her incredulously, waiting for

any explanation that she might provide but she didn't, she was quiet.

'Erm, what was that about?' Was that beggar a spy? Meghnad had his mind running with crazy possibilities but her answer was simply:

'Nothing, my love,' she cheekily smiled.

'That must be something.'

'It was just …'

'Did you know him?'

'No.'

Meghnad narrowed his gaze. 'So you just gave gold to a stranger?'

'Yes.'

Meghnad was trying to get a sense of the situation. And Prameela understood he was having a hard time, when she said: 'It's about giving, my love. I do tend to give a lot to the lower classes of our society. I feel we should do more to uplift them.'

So she likes charity?

'But well, that's …'

'Stupid? I know. Not many people understand why I do it. And I don't want them to. I have always been selfless when it came to giving instead of receiving. I think I inherited this habit from my mother.'

'Where is she?'

'She died of an illness.'

Meghnad shut his mouth. 'Really? So your mother instilled this in you?'

She nodded. 'Ever since I was young. I saw her fighting for the rights of the downtrodden as the nobles were always petty and ignorant about their needs. I always believed that if it wasn't for her illness, she would have changed this world. And I hope to continue that.'

Meghnad blinked. He never had a mother figure in his life. Mandodari was a silent person, someone he never gelled with. It was only Aunt Meenakshi who was someone he had been fond of … someone who had taught him how to be a good person but things changed after Vidhyut's death.

Meghnad tried not to remember the bad memories, but rather sought out the good ones.

'But a single person cannot bring change,' Meghnad grinned, 'I've seen fools do things for society and society spitting back on them.'

Prameela smiled back, but it was more of a silent mock. 'I firmly believe in karma. Good comes to those who do good to others. And vice-versa.'

Meghnad wanted to believe this but his father had caused so much destruction and death and in return he had received glory, reputation and … 'Fear,' he said.

'What?'

‘Fear is the harbinger of change, my dear. With fear, you can change this city. Imagine if you begin hunting down the nobles who harm the downtrodden, don’t you think that would do more than less?’

Prameela considered his proposition and he could see that she was quiet and calmly listening to him, but then she shook her head and was ready to defend herself, when the driver said: ‘We have reached,’ in a gruff manner.

Meghnad and Prameela got off the cart and Meghnad’s eyes fell on the mines — it looked like a graveyard of mud fields. They were deeply dug out, with torches close to them. What lay before them was a single dirt hill that accumulated in the form of a shadow in the background. A cave like entrance, with a serpentine tunnel, was guarded by the patrolling Naga soldiers. Prameela immediately grabbed Meghnad’s arm, guiding him to the other end of the mine to a shorter, bleaker gateway which was covered in thorns. Beyond that, more guards walked around the miners who were sleeping in the dead of night, close to the fields in small, polyester tents.

She pulled out her dagger and began cutting the shrubs, finally releasing the gate and opening it.

But when the gate opened, an abhorrent screeching sound was heard, causing a disruption that caused all the guards to move towards the gates.

No.

Prameela looked back, wide-eyed in fear. ‘We are going to get caught.’

23. Meghnad

He knew what he had to do.

He pulled out the soft, cotton-like ball which had the texture of cotton but had a small tendril made of bamboo.

‘What is this?’ Prameela asked, her eyes scanning the device.

‘A distraction,’ he grinned as he grabbed her by the waist and pushed her against the wall to hide in the shadows as guards came around the gate they were trying to open.

A torch light glinted in the corner of the wall as he lit the rope of his ball. It began to crackle and he tossed it on the other end of the streets, away from the gate.

‘Close your ears,’ he whispered and Prameela did …

It instantly blew up and instead of a fiery explosive, it wheezed and whistled and crackled in the air that alerted the guards, making them pull out their blades and rushing towards that direction.

‘What was that?’

But Meghnad didn’t have the time to answer. Instead he pulled her inside the gates and rushed through the mine fields, darting across the dark desert. The smell of mud infiltrated his nostrils, and the choppy, daft wind hurtled at his face, as they found themselves close to the miniature caves, away from the shacks of the miners and guards.

‘What was that?’ She asked again.

‘Potassium nitrate compressed into a small ball,’ Meghnad said, ‘it has lead oxide that on contact with fire, turns to lead atom causing the explosion that you just saw.’

Prameela was quiet for some time, just watching him with wide eyes.

‘Are you going to stay impressed or show me where they mine the Naagmani, my dear?’ Meghnad smiled.

Prameela swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded her head as she held his hand and directed him inside the cave, where a small ravine flowed. The smell was deathly but Meghnad had smelled things far worse. The ceiling was tight

and the walls were manmade and somewhat cracked as if they were speared and jabbed at by harsh weapons.

‘How do you know this place?’ asked Meghnad. ‘Your mother?’

‘My father, to be more precise. He always wanted me to love new developments in science.’

‘Wow. It’s a surprise your culture allows women to act beyond the domestic grounds. Ours don’t. For us, you are nothing but …’ Meghnad bit his lips. He couldn’t show his disdain towards women in general. ‘Nothing. I mean, something, but like …’

‘I know *everything* about the Rakshas culture.’ She mocked him but Meghnad laughed at that, as they walked in deeper and the lights kept dwindling.

‘You and umm …’ Meghnad carefully asked, ‘… your father, are you close?’

Prameela was thoughtful for a while before answering: ‘I trust him more than anything. He has never lied to me. So yes, we are close.’

‘I see. Can’t say the same about my father. So you aspire to be a scientist? I think you are someone who doesn’t want to have children? Just going about doing work and no time for household chores?’

‘A woman can handle the house as well as work or are you too daft to not understand that, my love?’

A sweet and poisonous response. In most cases, Meghnad would have killed a woman for speaking against him but Prameela was different. She was feisty just like … him.

‘And no, I don’t plan to be a scientist. I plan to start an organization.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of helping people.’

‘Poor people, you mean?’

Prameela didn’t have to answer. That was understood.

They reached the clearing from the narrow steep land they had been on walking for a while to see shovels and spears dug in the earth to uncover the blue stones, larger in quality, more shiny than their counterparts which were displayed like decorating stones on the street, the ones Meghnad had seen on his arrival.

He pulled out his radioactivity metre and knelt down close to that muddy stone, as he began to check the ratings of the radioactivity on his device and it instantly went to extreme red.

This is damn lethal and it can create the biggest weapon, bigger than Vaishnavastra or Pashupatastra.

He grinned to himself.

‘What does that mean?’ Prameela’s voice beckoned.

He had almost forgotten that she was behind him.

‘Uh …’ should I tell her the truth? ‘The organisation, would it be non-profit?’

‘What kind of altruistic organisation will be of profit?’

‘Ah, sad. I thought I would invest in it,’ Meghnad chuckled, coming to his senses. He knew what he had to do about the stone. ‘Don’t mind, my dear, but what is the point of such an organisation that helps the poor? They can’t practically give anything back to you.’

He had to take it from her father as a bride price. No matter what. And if he doesn’t give in, he will have no choice but to *destroy* the city.

This element was more important than any alliance and if he made his father understand the potency of Naagmani, he would oblige.

‘Have you ever helped a person, Lord Indrajit?’

The sound of his new name was nice. He felt strong. Meghnad smiled back. ‘Not really. I have though destroyed many cities, plunged and looted and what not to help my father. Does that count?’

Prameela came close, her lips inches away. ‘You have done nothing but killed your way through to here, to reach where you stand. You have managed to offend and despise everyone you meet.’

Meghnad’s smile faded because he spotted venom in her eyes. There was a slithery tone in her voice.

‘Sly words for a soon-to-be bride.’

‘All I say is, you have been a killer your whole life and it makes you feel proud,’ Prameela sighed. ‘But when you will save a life, believe me, you will feel happiness and contentment and that is why what I do has a point and what you do, doesn’t.’ She flared her nostrils and Meghnad realised that he had offended her. ‘So I ask you again, you managed to drag me down here, my *love,’* she spat, as if she had had enough of the prince of Rakshas Empire, ‘in the dirt, away from my own guards for something that you just identified. Don’t you think I have every right to know what it is?’

Meghnad thought for a moment. Can he trust this woman? But after such a long ordeal, this was the first time he had seen her being real — hurt, angry and volatile. This was the real Prameela, not the fake sexual animal that she was trying to portray.

And Meghnad found a certain level of irresistibility about her rawness.

‘You are wrong, you know,’ Meghnad said, looking straight at her, in the dead of the night where little specks of moonlight glistened through the spaces between the rock. The ray cut like a blade between the two shadows dancing on their faces. ‘I did help someone, once. And I failed.’ He was trying to hold back his tears. ‘And because of that, I was hated by the very woman who I actually

looked up to.'

Aunt Meenakshi …

Prameela didn't react, but Meghnad could see the sliver of understanding for the honesty he had just showed. 'What does this mean?' She pointed at the stones.

'This means, my dear, you won't be the only thing that'll be leaving after our ceremony. This will too.'

'You mean to say …'

Meghnad sighed. He didn't want to say more. 'I will teach you how to make Astras, once we marry. I promise you.'

'You promised me, you'll show me now.'

'Things change.' Meghnad knew he had won for now. 'But yes, your land has a lethal element that can be fruitful for the empire.'

'For *your* empire.'

'No, my love,' he cupped her red cheeks in his palms, 'from now onwards, *our* empire.'

24. Suparnika

The cobweb of bones blocked their path.

Meenakshi with her hood on, tried to conceal herself on her way to Mount Rishyamukha when she saw the hindrance in front of her. The smell from the searing bones was like burning hair. Her companions, Raghav and Laxman wrapped their shawls around their faces. Meenakshi glanced at Raghav's symbol — which didn't glimmer, but had a nice sheen to it.

It's so magical, what he possesses. My father was so right. This man is the damnation to our empire but a salvation to my quest.

'What is this?' Raghav asked.

The bones were blocking their path from one end of the tree trunk to another after which, the entrance to the cave lay.

Meenakshi dismounted from her horse and walked to the bones, touching the corners of it and she could see they were hard — almost unbreakable. She pulled out her sword that dangled from her hip and she tried to hurl it across the bones.

But the sword bounced off and the bones remained intact, not moving an inch.

'They are tough,' she said. 'Seems to me that it belonged to a Danav. Look at the size of that.'

'Danavs?' Laxman almost shrieked and his response was as Meenakshi had expected. Danavs were giants living in Illavarti before they quietly walked away to the island of Pataal, their original abode after the treaty that Vaman Avatar had signed with them.

'But Danavs were not allowed on this land anymore,' Raghav quietly added.

'But some do come,' Meenakshi said, recalling the time with her husband Vidhyut — who was also an Asura, brothers of Danavs who had come to Illavarti to seek riches but instead, fell in love with this land. 'To live here, to hide here when they are persecuted in their lands. Some rebels break their treaty. And some come in search of their dreams. They are refugees, hiding in plain sight.'

'So you mean to say we live amongst Asuras and Danavs today?' Laxman laughed. 'Who hide from us!'

Meenakshi nodded quietly. These bones were a remainder of Vidhyut and it was making her teary eyed.

‘Ironical, since once upon a time Manavs hid from them,’ Laxman laughed, but Raghav didn’t.

In fact, Meenakshi could see his burning gaze on her, as if he was trying to study her expression. Laxman’s laughter died down, when Meenakshi said, ‘Perhaps Sugreev is doing this on purpose.’

‘But you informed him?’ Raghav softly asked.

‘Yes. He knew we were coming. I sent a raven.’

‘What a blasphemous man!’ Laxman flared his nostrils, coming down and walking to the bones. He pulled out his bow and arrow and began shooting the bones and the web that tied them, but it didn’t break. ‘How dare he stop us.’

‘Frankly, my dear, you are a nobody in his company,’ Meenakshi chided.

‘He’s Lord Raghav!’ Laxman gestured at his brother.

‘In Ayodhya. Here, he’s at Sugreev’s mercy!’

‘What an ape,’ Laxman shrugged his shoulders. ‘I believe we should leave. Let’s find another alternative, brother.’

Raghav was contemplating his choices. He got down from his horse and walked towards the web, slowly letting his fingers trace through the rotting bones. Meenakshi could see he was thinking really hard. ‘What did you write in the letter, my lady?’ He asked her.

‘That it was you and you are the Avatar.’

‘Why did you tell him?’ shrieked Laxman, coming close to Meenakshi. ‘We hide the symbol for a reason.’

Raghav put up his hand. ‘Don’t, Lakhan.’

For a man who was about to kill her a few days back, he seemed awfully in control and calm, as if he got enough time to digest the situation at hand. At least that was what Meenakshi thought.

‘I told him because if I didn’t, he wouldn’t have taken you seriously. He meets many people who want his help and I believed your status as an Avatar could pique his curiosity. It was a strategic decision. I apologise, my lord, if you felt violated.’ Meenakshi bowed her head, even though bowing to a Manav felt a little insulting.

Raghav shook his head. ‘It’s all right. I know why Sugreev did it.’

Laxman and Meenakshi waited.

‘He’s testing me,’ Raghav announced, as he clamped his fist and punched the bones.

The bones cracked under the pressure.

‘Of what?’ Laxman asked.

‘These are Danav bones,’ Meenakshi raised her brows, ‘It’s not easy to break them.’

Raghav smiled. His face displayed unrelenting confidence, almost to the point of an arrogant grin, as he raised his right leg and swiftly rendered it through the air into the bones — breaking them apart.

Raghav tore through it finally and pushed apart the cobwebs, breaking the entire defense down.

Meenakshi was impressed. The very fact that he could break a Danav bone was commendable and, in fact, thought to be impossible for any mortal out there. Raghav then turned silently, walking toward his horse and mounting it.

‘Sugreev wanted to test whether I’m actually the Avatar or not.’ Raghav replied to Laxman.

‘How dare …’

And then it was heard. The loud grunting and squeaking sounds were heard — and immediately from the thick canopies of the misty forest appeared hairy looking men, hanging from the branches. They had spears and swords in their hands, but all made from the material found in the forests.

And Meenakshi knew who these ape-like men were, hiding in plain sight —

Vanars.

They swung to the ground and one of them said, ‘Lord Raghav, Prince of Ayodhya please … you may enter with your companions.’

Meenakshi eyed Raghav and they exchanged a smile. The three left their horses and walked into the large cave which had paintings on it, with torches lined along the way. Meenakshi studied them when Laxman whispered, ‘How do you know Sugreev? Isn’t your brother close to Vali?’

‘When Dashanan had come to wrestle Vali for sport, I was here and I had happened to meet Sugreev and we struck a bond. What happened to him was unjust. Vali had plotted his downfall very strategically.’ Meenakshi said, though she didn’t know how true her words were, for both Vali and Sugreev have different perspectives to it.

‘Would Sugreev trust you though?’

And of that, Meenakshi didn’t have an answer. In fact, Sugreev agreeing to meet Raghav was a surprise. It was a fluke. But it was her only chance to get Raghav’s help, because Sugreev was the only person who had good relations with the shipbuilders close to the shores of Illavarti, so Raghav could travel to Lanka.

And also, Sugreev had an army they could use.

As they reached the final clearing of the cave, they found themselves amongst hundreds of apes of different colours and sizes but when they looked closely,

they weren't apes — they were men but hairy and had synthetic tails made from cloth for they were worshippers of the monkey.

In the middle was a brown-coloured Vanar, with a broken crown over his head, sitting on a bamboo throne and next to him was a white-furred Vanar.

The crowned Vanar came on his feet and the first thing he did was plunge to the ground, shocking his followers who gasped as he said: 'Apologies, my lord. For what I did outside. I meant you no disrespect.'

Raghav instantly went for Sugreev's hands and picked him up. 'It's all right, Maharaja.'

'I was told …' he looked sneakily at Meenakshi, '… that you were here but I didn't believe you were who she said you were. And you can understand why I felt that way since your mention came from questionable sources.'

Meenakshi felt angry, but she just flared her nostrils and kept silent.

'I do, of course,' Raghav smiled.

'Maharaja Sugreev, you shouldn't have doubted me. I say the truth and nothing else,' Meenakshi said and Sugreev came towards her, his beady eyes and his bulbous mouth, now clearly visible as he grinned at her.

'Of course, my dear. But your brother has not been kind to us.' He was hunching. 'He supports my brother while I am stuck on this mountain where I hide from him, including my own men.' He flayed his arm at the other Vanars.

Meenakshi had heard about what happened. Vali was the king of Kishkindha, the Vanar kingdom, and he used to conduct a monthly sport of wrestling. When he heard an Asura had trespassed to usurp him, Vali challenged him to a duel. But it ended with Vali receiving a mortal wound. Vali had told Sugreev he would want to die in the caves and when Sugreev obliged, he learnt that Vali had revived. He came out, breaking the rocks and thought Sugreev was trying to usurp him since right after Vali's death, Sugreev had taken his throne. Vali challenged his brother and threw him out in anger and threatened him that if he ever set foot anywhere close to Kishkindha's premises, he shall kill him.

But Vali had a different take on this.

'And that's why I redeem him by bringing you, Lord Raghav, the Avatar of Vishnu, Prince of Ayodhya. He will help you against Vali,' Meenakshi announced and all the Vanars beat their chests, echoing in the lonely caves of Mount Rishyamukha.

Raghav smiled and added, 'I have sent a raven to my brother Bharat who is more than glad to fund your rebellion.'

Meenakshi had told Raghav to talk to Bharat so they could do something that would make Sugreev happy and then he would willingly help in return.

'Indeed, wonderful,' Sugreev smiled, 'but, clearly you see the numbers. We

don’t need funding, my lord. We can suffice ourselves with pond water and fruits.’

Raghav went quiet.

‘But still, the gesture is nothing short of divine intervention,’ Sugreev coughed, as he walked back to his throne, still hunched. He sat on it. ‘I presume, Lord Raghav, you want something from us.’

‘Your relations,’ Meenakshi said, ‘with the ship builders in the south.’ She knew Vali didn’t have them since he was never smart in building relations, but rather stayed happy where he was.

‘Ah, you plan to travel?’ chuckled Sugreev. ‘Where to, if I may ask?’

Before Raghav could answer, Meenakshi said: ‘Lady Sita has been kidnapped by my brother and Lord Raghav wants to save her.’

‘What a noble purpose,’ coughed the Vanar Maharaja, ‘your brother is quite an evil lad, I tell ya.’

You don’t say.

Meenakshi arched her brows while the furrowed Sugreev sat down, humming to himself as if his own voice entertained him. ‘And you would want an army since Bharat cannot give you one according to the kingship laws?’

Raghav nodded. ‘He can only support, individually as much as it’s in his power.’

‘Yes. So you want my relations and my army?’ Sugreev sighed. ‘And in return, you shall fund my rebellion?’

That sort of summed it up.

‘But my lord, I would need something else too.’ Sugreev looked at the white-furred Vanar who was Bajrang, more commonly known as Hanuman, by his peers for he had a disfigured jaw. ‘Your *involvement* in my rebellion.’

Laxman came forward in anger, but Meenakshi instantly raised her arm. ‘And why would you want that, Maharaja Sugreev?’ she asked, softly.

‘Oh, because, he’s an Avatar. We clearly saw what he was capable of outside, my lady. Those were not ordinary bones, but the bones of Dudichi, the very Danav who Vali had defeated once upon a time.’ Sugreev coughed again and now Meenakshi was getting a hint that he had some problem in his lungs. ‘Lord Raghav’s involvement can help me win the war and in return, we will give anything he wants.’

Meenakshi hadn’t anticipated this. The three exchanged glances. Meenakshi was about to refuse, when Raghav came forward: ‘All right! I will be a part of your rebellion.’

‘Wonderful,’ Sugreev clapped and all the Vanars except Bajrang, clapped and beat their chests enthusiastically, ‘What a wonderful response, my lord. You

shall be our saviour,' he bowed to Raghav. 'And, of course, Lady Suparnika, will help us too.'

Wait, what?

Meenakshi turned to Sugreev. 'What do you mean?'

'My lady!' he exclaimed. 'You bring us the Avatar of Vishnu and you won't help us? That makes me question your integrity in this cause and why you are doing whatever you are doing here. I thought you came here because you want to go against your brother, for he is a bad, bad man.'

Damn that ape!

Meenakshi turned to Raghav and Laxman, who suspiciously waited for her response.

The stakes were high. Meenakshi was playing in the shadows for a while before, using people as puppets but now she was in the middle of it. If she said yes, she would be openly betraying Dashanan and if Vali got to know of it, he would tell her brother. If she said no, Raghav would not trust her anymore.

As the beating of the Vanars continued in the background, she saw each face in the cave — the manipulative Sugreev scratched his beard, a sly smile dancing on his dry lips.

'Of course,' Meenakshi said, as she knew there was no turning back now, 'that's why I'm here.'

25. Prameela

She lost and she had two days left until her marriage with the demon prince.

She wasn't able to find how he made the Astras. Worse, she gave away something that she was unaware of — that Naagmani had the potential to become a lethal bomb.

She had been thoughtfully musing over this fact for hours at a stretch, looking at the artificial lights of Naaglok from her window, which would dim during night time to create the atmosphere of what she called home.

Did her father know of Naagmani's potency? Did Kaliya know?

Meghnad would do anything to get his hands on them now.

Our empire.

He was not an idiot. But then, what did she expect? This man had the audacity to bring down Swarg to his knees.

Without him, there won't be a Rakshas Empire.

Dashanan had the best set of people working for him and he had trained them to the fullest. She had heard, perhaps a rumour, that he made the astrologers tell him what the auspicious time and day was for Meghnad to be born and then he made sure his wife gave birth during that time. He manipulated the situation to the point of prolonging her pregnancy and operation.

What a sadistic freak!

But unlike his father, there were shades in Meghnad, that he hid behind his extroverted, callous exterior.

I must talk to Kaliya about what has happened. After all, he gave me a carriage to the mines without asking for what.

She went outside to inform a guard when she heard something — a knock on her window.

Flabbergasted, she turned around almost shrieking when she saw a familiar face peeking inside.

It was Meghnad.

What the …

Prameela rushed to the glass window, opening it to see that Meghnad was on

the ledge and had somehow carried himself from his room to hers on a narrow ledge.

‘What are you doing?’ She asked with wide eyes.

‘Heh.’ He was on the brink of falling down, but he still had that casual, disarming grin. ‘I believe this isn’t the most sophisticated way of entering a woman’s room, but I wanted to speak to you urgently since yesterday,’ Meghnad said.

‘We could have done it tomorrow.’

‘And risk losing sight of you for one more day? I doubt it, my lady.’

What a flirt! Prameela sighed, but she liked that. She pulled him inside and closed the windows behind. Then she rushed to her front door and saw the guards outside swarming her corridor as per routine. She shut it and locked her room and when she turned, she saw Meghnad had already made himself comfortable on her bed, eating the cherries from her study table.

‘What is it that you want, my love?’ She forced words of sweetness with struggle, ‘At such a dead hour of the night?’

‘I had an itch.’ He frowned.

‘Where?’ She narrowed her gaze. ‘And you plan to make me scratch it, is it?’

‘Not *that* itch.’ He chuckled. ‘An itch to prove you wrong.’

‘About what?’

‘I’m not as bad as you think I am.’

Prameela noticed his honest eyes watching hers, but she didn’t know how much she could trust this man. She sat opposite to her bed, on her armchair and leaned back, head cocked in the front. ‘And why do you believe I think you are bad?’

‘I got an inkling.’ He paused. ‘I am sorry if I hurt you with my words back there and I am ever grateful for you taking me out …’

‘And in return, you didn’t give me anything. You promised me.’

‘I know. I suck at promises.’ He lowered his head.

‘Why do you care what I think of you?’

Meghnad lifted his eyes, watching her intently. ‘Usually I don’t. But ever since yesterday, I have been getting irritated thinking about what you said. About helping people, about how I have always been this bad person. And believe me, I am. I am quite a nuisance to some, and of assistance to others. And most of the times, I don’t give a rat’s ass to what a woman thinks of me. But you … you are different.’

Prameela could see how much he was affected by her words. And by mercy, she was enjoying it.

‘I have always been under the influence of my father, please understand. And

my father wasn't a hero. He was always a pretty messed up individual. He thought of himself as god. He was delusional that Shiva visited him and gave him the power of immortality. But I always looked up to him because there was no one else.' Meghnad sighed and Prameela was noticing how his chest was heaving. 'No one else to be really there … for me. Uncle Kumbhkaran was there, but he was into science and Uncle Vibhishan … he had always been distant since he didn't like my father, ever. Father and I, we used to go on hunts, wrestle, and just have these moments of actually enjoying each other's company. And I saw how he treated people around him.'

'And you mimicked him?'

He nodded. 'I still do what he would do in my situation. It's like I never learnt to grow my own individuality. And I don't think there is anything wrong in it. He is a great man. He's a conqueror of Illavarti. Do you know how proud I am of him even though he has been absent during most of my important days? The Rakshasas were a disbanded Tribe who worked for others like slaves. And look at us now. People fear us.'

'You speak of fear as if it's good?'

'Isn't it?'

'And what about doing the right thing?'

His expression changed when she said that. But he diverted from the topic. 'I have a mother, but umm, she wasn't active in my life. Always been the silent one and I thought every woman was like that except when I met my aunt Meenakshi. I was small and she was like you — composed and feisty. You remind me so much of her.' He chuckled to himself. 'And that's why I think I have this itch to impress you because I failed to impress her.'

'What did you do?'

'I had an opportunity to save her husband,' Meghnad sighed. 'And I tried doing it. But he got caught. You see, he wasn't like us but that's a different story for a different time. And then my aunt … she wasn't happy about it and she stopped talking to me, the only one who I respected shut me down …'

'And your hatred for women continued.' Prameela completed.

'I don't hate women,' he said.

'But you don't respect them too or that's how your reputation goes.'

He didn't say anything. He was quiet as the shadows on his face danced. He got off the bed and came close to Prameela, kneeling down, next to her. 'Believe me when I say this, I wasn't really interested in being with you, Prameela. I thought you were just a political ally to me. But I think you might able to fill the gap that the women have left in me. I am not a bad man. I can be good. If you have the heart to change me.'

Prameela couldn’t help but let her hand trace his perfect jawline, his dark skin and ruffle his wavy hair. She couldn’t help herself from doing that. ‘Were you hurt when I said you do nothing but destroy?’

‘Hurt is an understatement for what I felt, my love.’ And Prameela could see his eyes crinkling with tears.

How you affect someone so fast is a gift only few possess over fewer people.

And in her case, it was just him.

‘I apologise. I was just …’

‘It’s okay.’ He smiled. ‘I would like to know you more. I don’t want us to marry out of political ambitions any longer but because we want to do it, out of the need and desire to be with each other.’ And he laid his head on her lap.

And Prameela looked at the door, as she traced her fingers through his scalp for she was in a dilemma —

Should I tell Kaliya and let Meghnad die or marry Meghnad and potentially risk my future for he could be sweet-talking me into giving him Naagmani?

And Prameela, for sure, didn’t have an answer to this.

But she sure knew, she would have to decide by *tomorrow*.

26. Laxman

The kingdom was huge.

It canvassed like a painting and Laxman had a hard time figuring out exactly where it began and where it ended. The walls were granite and large, the gates had thorns and the grills were made of iron and brass. Even though it was a huge fortress, the kingdom was engulfed in big trees to be concealed from the common man’s eye.

Laxman was moving towards the fortress with Suparnika and her band of trusted Rakshasas whom she paid well to stay silent and follow her. They were not ready to be part of treason against the feared Dashanan, but somehow through gold and the fear of an Avatar, she won them to her side. But they were few in number and she had said — there was no turning back now.

Dashanan, one way or another, might get to know about Meenakshi’s hurtful betrayal, but to hell with it. She shrugged her shoulders and went on with the plan.

The first step was: Enter the kingdom with the help of Meenakshi’s reputation. Vali would easily entertain her, which he wouldn’t have done for others.

‘Keep an eye where most of the guards of Vali stand,’ Meenakshi said, as she rode her horse right next to Laxman.

Second step to the plan: Notice how the security of the kingdom was and identify the location of safe passages in the castle.

Laxman, on the other hand, had a helmet on and a breastplate with shades of dark colour from blackberries smeared on him. He had to look like a Rakshas, after all. And he was here solely for one reason — to help Meenakshi execute the plan and keep an eye on her, whether she was betraying them in the process of doing this.

You can’t trust a Rakshas.

Sugreev had said that to Raghav and Laxman in confidence, away from her.

The gates opened wide and Laxman’s eyes fell on the long towers that stood beyond the gates. Two towers.

‘This is the western gate of Kishkindha. The eastern gate is on the opposite side, while the north has a river and the south has a wasteland. You need to choose one gate from where Sugreev’s men will enter.’ Meenakshi directed him as Vali’s men led them towards the wrestling stadium where Vali currently was.

‘And where would Raghav come from?’

‘Depends. His entry must be a secret. You must plan fast and act quickly.’ Meenakshi had a stern face, but she constantly smiled at the civilians who bowed at her.

All in Vali’s kingdom respected her for she was Dashanan’s sister. The shacks and the shops were lined, the streets were wide, but not structured, the banners held up showed the symbol of Vali’s empire. All the citizens in Kishkindha were happy and content. Meenakshi pointed out the armoury, the treasury and the ministry complexes, though not many ministers survived to live there. The big palace of Vali wasn’t like the ones you would see in Ayodhya — grand and jewelled, but rather very simple. It was made of raw materials, isolated from the city.

‘Vali treats his kingdom like he belongs amongst the masses. In fact, he does. He’s not like Sugreev. He doesn’t revel in a throne. He walks without security.’ Meenakshi said. ‘I have been dealing with him ever since I had shifted to the neighbouring city of Janasthan. He has always been … kind to me, supplying my men grains and helping me with the army when I need it, even with navigations through these forests.’

‘And you would betray him? For a woman you don’t know?’

Meenakshi didn’t say anything. Laxman really questioned her motives, but he didn’t have a choice right now — he had to follow her.

They reached the wrestler’s land which was a barren field filled with people clapping and hooting in colourful clothes, while in the middle, men with rags and loin clothes, battled each other, breaking each others’ bones and flesh.

‘And that’s Vali.’ Meenakshi said, pointing to the bigger Vanar, who had black fur and a pale face, with a muscular frame, as he easily held off his opponent, grabbed him by the neck and then …

Plummeted him straight on the ground!

Then, he twisted his arm and tore it apart from his body, tossing it like a chicken leg, as the Vanar wrestler howled in absurd pain.

Vali stood up, as people clapped for him, and when his eyes set on Meenakshi, ‘Ah, what a dear, dear sight, my love.’

Meenakshi smiled and Laxman could see it was forced. ‘Also,’ she muttered to Laxman under her breath, ‘I must mention this. He is in love with me.’

The crowd broke away from Vali, as he came from the dusty fields and tightly

hugged the dismounted Meenakshi. Laxman, like a royal guard to the Rakshas queen of Janasthan, stayed next to her.

‘When I received a letter from you, I was in pure delight. How wonderful of you to grace this day with your presence!’ Vali smiled and he had this very charming personality.

Laxman saw the major difference between Sugreev and Vali: they were blood brothers, but while Sugreev looked old, malicious, hunched and coughing all the time, Vali was fit, muscular and warm.

Are we supporting the right man?

‘I was missing you, my dear,’ Meenakshi effortlessly lied. ‘I hope you don’t mind catching up for old time’s sake. I plan to stay the night.’

Vali grabbed her by the waist. ‘You can stay here forever, if you remember my proposition.’

Gee, that’s awkward. This lady is plotting to kill him and he still hopes she’ll marry him.

Meenakshi playfully pulled herself away from his grasp. ‘Of course, my dear, but I’m a widow and you wouldn’t want that baggage with such a high title of the king of Kishkindha. You have Tara, after all. She’s so beautiful.’

‘Ah,’ he shrugged, ‘a man can have multiple wives, even at this age.’

‘Also, I plan to discuss with you our annexation plans towards Malyavata Mountains. There are a few forest Tribes that are not submitting to the Rakshasas,’ she said in a placid tone.

‘And I thought this was a social visit.’

‘It can be both. Can my men stay in the city?’ She asked, gesturing at Laxman and the other band of soldiers with her.

Vali, instead of looking at anyone else, glanced at Laxman and walked up to him. Laxman could feel the might of the great Raja of Kishkindha — the muscular warrior, whose hand was considered to be so strong that with one slap, he could take a life.

I mean, these were the stories you tell at night to kids.

In his presence and his searing gaze, Laxman could see why Vali seemed so threatening and warm at the same time.

‘Who is he? Never seen him before with you.’

‘A new recruit,’ Meenakshi said confidently.

‘Seems weak!’ He chuckled slapping Laxman on the back. Laxman could swear he felt a dent on his armour. ‘Why would you recruit him?’

‘He’s intelligent.’ Meenakshi answered. ‘And he’s stronger than he looks.’

‘Do you wrestle, young chap?’ Vali asked.

Laxman shared a nervous glance with Meenakshi. But before Meenakshi

could respond, Vali grabbed hold of Laxman's arm and began dragging him to the field. He pushed Laxman on the ground, as Laxman caught on to his wits.

Meenakshi scolded, 'Vali! He is my recruit. You cannot treat him like this.'

Vali looked back at the Rakshasi. 'It's all fun and games, my love. After all, I'm testing whether he's really fit to be around you and protect you. Or he's just a wimp, since he looks an awful lot like one.' And before Laxman could comprehend, Vali sprinted towards Laxman, butting his massive head against his breastplate and tossing him to the ground.

Laxman reeled and felt his stomach churn with the tension and a retching sensation. Then, he saw two massive fists coming towards him.

Dodging them swiftly, Laxman put up his arms in a cross, letting the fists beat the gauntlets but he could feel they were being dented.

But when Vali got bored, he pulled himself back and picked Laxman like a toy and threw him down on the ground.

Dust swirled as Laxman tried to control his senses and try to make sense of what was happening to him.

Why was he doing this? Fighting with a random man from the army? Was this how he was as a person? I can't wait for Raghav to kill this monkey.

'Come on, wakey wakey, chap.'

Laxman gritted his teeth. He could feel his iron sword pulling his weight down and his bronze armour making his body stiff. He loosened the straps on his armour, finally letting loose as he clamped his fist.

'Oh, someone has grown a pair,' laughed the Raja of Kishkindha. 'You know why I chose you, chap?'

But before he could answer, Laxman ran towards him, yelling loudly when instead of lurching at him, he swiftly turned between his legs and pulled his feet, to make him fall on the ground. As Vali tried to stand, Laxman leapt on his back, locking Vali's arm and legs tightly with his own. Vali tried to move and Laxman held him for a while until Vali just … stood up.

As if it didn't affect him, Vali stood up and broke away from Laxman's lock.

The monkey king brought his burly arms together and picked Laxman up like he was a feather but instead of throwing him again, he straightened him on the ground and smiled. 'You are good. He is good!' He yelled at Meenakshi, who was sweating profusely right now. 'Where did you get him from?'

'He came from Lanka,' she smiled nervously.

Laxman had his skin darkened but Vali just shrugged, wrapping his arms around Laxman. 'My dear, I love you but it doesn't blind me,' he announced, as tension began to grow. 'He's a Manav, not a Rakshas. The question begs, my dear …' his smile and his warmth turned to stark coldness when Laxman

realised Vali wasn’t such a brawny buffoon as he portrayed himself to be.

‘Why do you have a Manav employed as a guardsman? Is something up that I or your brother are not aware of?’

27. Prameela

Kaliya had entered and he wanted answers.

Prameela was alone in her room, trying to figure out what to say. She was still confused and there was only one day to go.

And there she saw, the eunuch's shadow entering her room from the door and Prameela turned her head. He was in his overgrown cloak. His lanky, tight face watched her intently as he said, 'Princess, I waited for you yesterday. Tomorrow is the wedding and I hope you have answers.'

Prameela sighed. 'I failed, Lord Kaliya.'

There was a momentary pause.

'He didn't share anything.' She continued. 'He said he would after our marriage. He wants to trust me more.'

Kaliya remained silent, contemplating. 'Do you believe he would?'

'I don't know. He hasn't shown me any vice.'

'He's a bad, evil man, princess.' Kaliya prompted. 'You cannot get married to him. Should I try to postpone the wedding?'

Prameela shook her head. 'Let me go to Lanka and see whether I can learn from him. Let me gain his trust.'

Kaliya walked forward and he slowly traced his fingers across Prameela's chin. 'Did you do everything I told you to, to bring him down on his knees?'

'I did.' Prameela had at least *tried.* 'He's smart.'

'Of course, he is. He brought down Swarg, after all.' Kaliya pursed his lips. 'And what was the meaning of going to the mine fields that night?'

I was hoping he won't ask me this.

Prameela didn't know what to answer. 'He wanted to see whether Naagmani was radioactive or not.'

'Radioactive? What is that?'

'A method to find whether a simple object can turn into a bomb,' she said, as she had learnt from her science gurus in the city when she was a child.

'Naagmani has the potential to be made into a bomb?' Kaliya almost shrieked.

Prameela knew if she answered this, things would get more complicated. *My*

loyalties lie with my family but if they know that Meghnad wants Naagmani for nefarious, bomb-making reasons, they would not let him take it and it'll result in a bitter war since Meghnad would do anything to grab it. 'No, there was no radioactivity.'

Kaliya sat close to her, his eyes searching hers. 'Princess, can I ask you something?'

She was exhausted. She hadn't slept the entire night and the next day her life was about to change, but she nodded. 'Yes.'

'Are you falling in love with him?'

And at that, her eyes shot up, almost defensive. But before she could say no, her tongue didn't roll, her mouth didn't allow it as if something inside her, in her chest disallowed her. 'Uh …'

I can change him.

Kaliya instantly stood up with a grin. 'Princess, let's go with your plan. Alright? You marry him and find how he does it and then you may leave him to the dogs later.'

Prameela smiled back. 'Seems like a good idea,' and with that, he left the room, leaving her with a thought — a fresh, warm thought.

If someone would have told her a few days back, that she would be happy marrying the prince of Rakshas, she would have scoffed.

But today, things have changed.

She really did look forward to tomorrow.

I hope it goes well.

28. Suparnika

When the attack begins, the torch of the eastern tower will be lit by Laxman. And meanwhile, Meenakshi was supposed to distract Vali as he sipped his almond milk.

He was watching Meenakshi intently while he lay on his cot, bare-chested and hairy, with a straight gaze that would pierce her skin. He had a way of being nice and at the same time, daunting. They were in the living room in his palace, which was decorated by small plants that he often watered and was obsessed with, further enhanced by colourful cushions and fire lights which showered light in the dense room.

‘So you want me to believe that you hired him just like that?’ Vali asked.

‘I want you to believe the truth and as mundane as it sounds, it is the truth.’ Meenakshi hadn’t gone for an elaborate, convoluted plan. ‘I know Dashanan is clear about not having any other Tribal guard close to royalty, especially a Manav out of trust issues, but Laxman was trustworthy. The lad is talented too. He locked you down when even my brother failed to do that.’

‘Your chap is opportunistic,’ he sipped the milk. ‘But good, all right. Then I shall talk to Dashanan about it. I have plenty of able warriors I would like to recommend to Your Highness.’

Meenakshi knew that this would lead to enquiries but she remained placid followed by a smirk. ‘You are the king.’ Vali and Sugreev were physically different, but internally — they were manipulative.

‘What can I help you with?’

Meenakshi walked to the window, close to the red drapes and looked outside. Any moment, Laxman would be using her guards to attack the towers and infiltrate the city.

And this would be it. The moment of damnation. The moment Dashanan’s empire would begin to cripple, for Vali was an important ally in his stronghold over Illavarti.

It worked out well, in one way or the other.

And hopefully, Sugreev would keep his word in return for doing such a big

favour. A favour for that ape.

The things you do for love.

'It's sad what your brother did to your husband, though,' Vali continued without letting Meenakshi speak about her fake problems in Dandhak which she had planned to continue until Laxman's attack. 'I wanted to send my condolences but I didn't know if it was right to do so in a scroll, on a piece of paper.'

'It's good you came in person and did it then,' Meenakshi said sarcastically.

Vali chuckled. 'Don't blame me for confrontations. You know I hate it. I always have.' He paused. 'He shouldn't have done it. I mean, he had his reasons, sure. But he should have thought about you.'

'He did … for a second and then he executed my husband.' Meenakshi sighed.

'I know all about betrayals.' Vali grinned sadly. 'My brother, who promised me his undying loyalty, trapped me in a cave to die when he himself knew I hadn't taken my last breath yet. He checked my breath, you know. He knew I was breathing but to keep a face, he showed how sad he was that I died.'

'Did you happen to meet him?' She asked about Sugreev.

'I would not. I have told the city I'm hunting him just to put a strong face but I don't want to.'

'Why?' Meenakshi arched her brows. Vali was always a vengeful man, but right now, seeing him like this, it kind of changed her notions about him.

'Well,' he shrugged, 'I learnt, my dear, to forgive people for petty reasons. Pointless wars are not worth it. People do stupid things just to take revenge. Imagine, if people stop doing that. Wouldn't that be the utopia we are usually promised?'

'If not for our satisfaction, what should we fight for?' Meenakshi asked.

Vali stood up, walking towards her, as he also came close to the window where the eastern tower was starkly visible. 'For the right thing.'

Meenakshi couldn't believe he said it. For the right thing? She had been fighting for a cause to satiate herself, but in the process of doing that, she had lost all morals.

'Remember to never forget yourself,' Vidhyut had said.

But who am I? I am just a Rakshasi who lives for nothing.

But can I live for something? Can I try?

Meenakshi saw the eastern tower light up. The howls were audible. The screeches instantly alerted Vali who threw open the windows, to see outside where civilians were rushing out. His houses were being burnt. His men and the guards were fending off numerous attacks.

‘What the hell is going on?’ He shouted and then turned to Meenakshi. ‘Was it you?’

Meenakshi smiled. And then, with a firm jerk, she pushed him out of the window.

29. Meghnad

Today was the night. But underneath the earth, no light or darkness was seen, only the shuffling of people's footsteps was heard.

And while he prepared to look his best, he did miss his parents here. He wanted them to be by his side, while he would take his vows and pledge his love to Prameela.

Even though, the love was slightly questionable.

But not everyone gets their due. Meghnad had known since the beginning that his parents thought of him as a kid who had grown up enough to take his decisions and apply them in his life.

Also, this was just one of the many weddings Meghnad would exercise. To be with one woman was considered an atrocious concept in the Rakshas culture even though monogamy was practiced in other Tribes.

Did he really mean what he had said to her last night? Meghnad didn't know. He did feel that itch though and he did feel the grovelling in his stomach.

A knock was heard on the door and when he went to get it, he found the eunuch with two of his guards standing, smiling palely at Meghnad. 'Your Highness, might we take a leave?'

Couldn't they have sent a better person?

Meghnad smiled. 'Yes.' He grabbed hold off his wedding sherwani and started putting it on, as he closed the door behind. He began to walk towards the temple, where the ceremony would take place. 'Where's my uncle?' He asked Kaliya.

'He has been informed. He awaits at the temple.' The eunuch smiled, without showing his teeth, and he gave Meghnad goosebumps on his arms.

'And Prameela?'

'Her too.'

Meghnad smiled back.

But there was something wrong.

And he had a feeling he was about to find out soon.

30. Prameela

Something was wrong.

And her suspicions were clear, when she tried to open her door, after getting ready in her sari — that it was locked.

She began to knock on it, but no one answered.

‘Hello!’ She yelled louder.

Prameela didn’t understand what was going on. She went back, her fingers fidgeting with each other, as she tried to think of all the possibilities of what was happening until — the door finally opened and she could feel a wave of relief, only to find her fair-skinned, obese father entering her room.

‘Hi, my dear,’ he said, closing the door behind her.

‘What is happening? Why are you here?’ Prameela began throwing questions at her father, who was just standing there, firmly and watching her.

‘I love you, you know that, right?’

Prameela arched her brows. ‘What is going on?’

‘Whatever I did, I did it for you. Please try to understand.’

‘Father!’ She exclaimed. ‘Tell me.’

‘I knew about Kaliya’s plan.’

She narrowed her eyes.

‘In fact, it was I who suggested the idea.’

‘It’s impossible. You would never risk my life.’

‘I apologise, my child. I knew you were capable enough of knowing about Meghnad’s ability to use Astras, but you failed and it is understandable. You were not ready. But nonetheless, we have no choice now.’

Prameela came forward. ‘You let me be close to him? What if he turned out to be bad?’

‘He’s still bad.’

‘He’s not. He’s a good man. But I doubt you now.’

‘We can’t let this marriage happen, my dear.’ He came close, trying to hold Prameela’s shoulders. ‘We had a secondary plan in motion. If you aren’t able to obtain information from the subject about the bomb creation, then we kill the

creator itself. He wanted that.'

Prameela narrowed her eyes. 'Who's he?'

'My ally. King Bharat from Ayodhya. Do you know what we just learnt? Meghnad's father was behind Bharat's sister-in-law's kidnapping? The family is insane.' Ananth's eyes were getting teary-eyed. 'You can't go to the ceremony anymore.'

'So to call Meghnad here and use me as a tool … it was your plan?' She shook her head. 'And I thought I could trust you!'

Ananth was quiet. 'You broke my heart too.'

'What do you mean?'

'You like that monster. He's our enemy.' He said.

'How do I …'

'Kaliya saw it in your eyes.'

Prameela clenched her jaw. But then she retreated. 'I don't. Kaliya doesn't know anything. Father, all I wanted was the betterment of this city. You could have included me in the plan. You could have told me you were part of this since the beginning. You could have told me about Bharat's inclusion. But you didn't. And you know why? Because you didn't want to show your true side to me — that you are manipulative and you are hurtful. You wanted to show me you are the same father. I used to look up to. You were afraid, weren't you?'

Ananth sighed. 'Why did you like him?'

'I don't like him! I had a plan. I don't care whether he dies or not. What I care is you trusting me.' She exclaimed.

Ananth nodded. 'I am sorry.' And he flayed his arms to hug her and Prameela did the same, reluctantly, hugging him back. 'Let me deal with Meghnad and we shall talk afterwards.'

'Where do you intend to kill him?' She added.

'Outside the temple,' he said, after thinking twice.

'All right, Papa,' Prameela smiled and nodded. 'Let me know when it happens.'

Ananth, left the room and the moment the door was closed behind him, Prameela ran for her window after collecting a dagger she always kept under her bed. She opened the glass window, and stepped out, standing on the ledge from where Meghnad had entered.

And she saw blocks of strewn hay below. If he was going to manipulate her, she was liable to do that as well. She had to show she was okay with Meghnad being dead, to know about his current location.

I can't let him die.

After all, he's my husband.

31. Laxman

He fell from the window. But it didn’t kill him.

Laxman had been shooting arrows at the guards who were coming at him, in the midst of the unrelenting fire and rage — the yelling of civilians, the breaking of the treasury and the toppling of the towers. Laxman made sure no innocents would die by not letting Sugreev’s men hurt enemy Vanars. The nobles’ houses were being sacked and broken apart, while the civilians watched in horror.

And in the middle, Raghav and Laxman fought the incoming forces in Kishkindha. Raghav had fended them off, leaving for the other side to help Sugreev — who was now moving towards the wounded Vali with his mace. The current king of Kishkindha had just been pushed from the first floor of his palace by none other than Suparnika.

Perhaps we can trust her after all.

And before he could see how Raghav was faring with Sugreev, Laxman felt a smack that came out of nowhere.

He fell and was tossed on the ground, only to come to his senses, realising what had just happened. He felt blurry for a moment, until he blinked hard to see a Vanar guard in front of him.

He had managed to use Suparnika’s guards to open the gates, kill the tower guard, who were the onlookers and then finally let Sugreev’s men inside. And once they were in, they began to attack the houses of all those people who were supporters of Vali; be it politicians, or the rich merchants of the state.

It was over.

Laxman gritted his teeth and instead of using his archery skills, he just punched him and then kicked the Vanar in between the legs. And by pulling an arrow, he plunged the blade’s end inside the Vanar’s eye. A guard appeared from the same direction, yelling and screeching as Laxman used his bow as a shield to stop the attack. The blade got deflected as Laxman punched the Vanar in the gut and pulled out the arrow, instantly shooting the Vanar point blank through the head.

Another came behind him and before he could do anything about it, Laxman

saw a white furry light coming so fast and taking the guard away from him. And as his eyes concentrated, he learnt who he was —

BAJRANG!

The white-furred Vanar winked at Laxman and they lurched from their paths to leave for another.

And that was when a searing pain occurred …

Laxman felt something in his back. He turned his head slightly to see an arrow had pierced his skin. He pulled it out and darted his eyes to see where it came from. He was panting as he did so, when he saw a young boy, not a Vanar, had his bow and arrow, pointed towards him.

'I would suggest you leave. Your leader is defeated.' Laxman said.

The boy shot another arrow and it pierced Laxman on the shoulder. Laxman didn't like the pain.

Damn it.

Laxman strung his own arrow. 'Stop or I have to shoot you.'

The boy didn't listen. Instead, he was getting the arrow from his quiver when instantly Laxman released his — letting the arrow pierce the boy's palm. Blood spurted, as the boy fell on the ground, crying in pain. Laxman shot another, after stringing it tightly, and it pierced the boy on the knees, making him scream in pain again.

Laxman walked to him, but the boy managed to pull out his dagger and leap at him when Laxman twisted the boy's arm and stabbed him with his own blade.

As the dagger slipped deep inside the boy, he could see the boy's life ebbing away. Laxman noticed the boy was a Rakshas — dark-skinned, oily hair and almond eyes.

'VALI HAS BEEN KILLED!' Someone announced at the back.

The fire blazed around Laxman, as some Vanars cried and some rejoiced. He saw Sugreev with his mace, Vali's blood trickling from it. Lord Raghav was carrying the former Maharaja of Kishkindha and displaying his body to the people, his arrow having pierced Vali's chest, straight in the heart.

And Sugreev announced that he was the king now.

Laxman directed his attention towards the boy, whose lifeless eyes were now watching him. 'I'm sorry.' He frowned, as he pulled out the boy's dagger for he realised how in the name of the war, he had to kill someone so young.

Only for Sita Maa.

And then he saw the bow. It was finely crafted; made with bamboo. Laxman picked it up, studying its structure, when his eyes fell on something. They were initials, probably of the boy and it read:

AK

32. Meghnad

Meghnad knew he was about to die.

The moment he reached the outskirts of the temple where the rock statue of Shesh Naag glowered, having Naagmani in its fanged face mouth, in the dead of the night, he could see no one was there. This place was away from the civilians, from people in general. His men weren't here. Kumbhkaran was not present.

Was he killed?

Meghnad turned to see Kaliya and his five guards standing around him. Meghnad had no weapon, no trickery with him. He had left it in his room and Kaliya knew that.

'My prince, I apologise for this. But Lord Ananth believes you aren't fit for his daughter.' Kaliya began.

'Then why waste time and call me here?'

'To show your death as an accident,' Kaliya smiled.

'An entire legion of Rakshasas are killed in Naaglok and you would blame it on the third party. My father will kill all of you.' He baited them even though he knew Dashanan wouldn't do anything since it was Meghnad's karma that led him here, to this very moment of his death.

Kaliya chuckled. 'We have enough enemies to blame it on.'

'Why would you do this?'

'To kill Dashanan's strongest man, he had to be brought here, alone and vulnerable,' Kaliya explained. 'King Bharat wanted that, especially after what you did with his sister-in-law.'

'I didn't do anything,' Meghnad arched his brows.

'Oh, apologies, your father. Bharat wants you dead and then continue to do the same with your siblings.'

Meghnad didn't want to believe that Akshaya and Atikaya would be hurt in the process.

'And finally your father,' Kaliya concluded and then he directed his men with blades in his hand to come forward and kill Meghnad.

As they began to approach Meghnad, he clamped his fist and punched one

guard, dodging his blade. Another appeared, and Meghnad tried to stop it, but got stabbed.

Another stab!

And then another!

He could feel his energy draining. And he wished he could have taken the Somas to heal himself, but he didn't have any.

Meghnad could feel his blood trickling from his mouth, as he was kneeling on the ground, face ashen, looking at the guards circling him.

Karma always catches up on you.

Meghnad felt a punch across his face and a kick on his stomach, as he fell on the dust. And he could, in his final moments, remember all the harm he had caused.

All the madness, he was responsible for.

She was right. I have not been a good man. I deserve this.

And then, Meghnad heard it. A blade swished and stabbed the head of the guard, who fell instantly. Meghnad arched his brows, when he saw where it came from. Kaliya was rigid with shock too.

It was Prameela who had come to rescue him.

Meghnad smiled and he could see Prameela was afraid and worried but fighting valiantly for him. Meghnad managed to grab the sword of the fallen soldier and instantly plunge it in the second guard's chest.

He swiped it right across the third guard's head and then smacked the hilt on the fourth guard.

And the fifth guard dodged him, deflecting his sword.

Instead of killing him right away, Meghnad winked with his bruised eye and tossed him his sword.

In haste, the soldier left his sword and picked up Meghnad's. And in that moment of distraction, Meghnad kicked him in the abdomen, as he fell on the ground.

Staggering, he walked to Kaliya and grabbed him by the throat. 'You bloody … where is Kumbhkaran?'

'They were … not … the only ones.' Kaliya struggled.

And before Meghnad could realize it, more soldiers had appeared from the corners and he pushed the eunuch back. He could see Prameela getting tense, as she instantly rushed for Meghnad and he hugged her by the side. 'Isn't this just too romantic?' He asked her. She frowned at him. 'Ergh, I suppose we have a difference in opinion.'

'You're badly hurt.'

'You are rightly informed, my love.' He groaned, as he saw more than a

dozen soldiers had come, and sirens were being blown to call out to more.

‘What should we do?’ Prameela asked.

Meghnad really wanted a smoke bomb at that moment. ‘We wait for a miracle.’ As he said this, it happened — Meghnad could hear loads of horses appearing in the darkness and leading them from the forefront was Kumbhkaran.

With his men, he began to slash the enemies, as both the Rakshasas and the Nagas fought each other. Kumbhkaran jumped from his stallion and walked towards Meghnad, ‘We need to leave. Our men will hold them off while we escape.’

‘What has happened?’

‘Guards came. They began to attack us mindlessly, but some of us escaped; the ones you see here. We saw the hustle-bustle going on here and found you,’ Kumbhkaran explained. ‘Once we escape, we need to kill the serpent king. But for now, let’s leave.’

Meghnad saw his soldiers were fighting for him, for Kumbhkaran and for the empire. And he could see more Nagas, coming with their horses, from the other side of the street.

The temple of Shesh Naag was riddled with bloodshed.

‘All right, let’s do it.’

Meghnad decided to grab the nearest horse, though a jolt of pain went through his body as he sat on it. He turned to look at Prameela.

‘What about Naagmani? You don’t want it to create Astras?’ Prameela asked, her eyes now teary.

Meghnad looked around; his men were dying and he had seconds left to escape. He could either go to his right now and get the Mani or …

‘Is there a possibility of you joining me in my journey back home?’ Meghnad asked.

‘You don’t want the Mani?’

Meghnad shook his head. ‘I want you.’

‘Are you asking me to run away with you?’ Prameela raised her brows.

‘I would understand if you can’t. This is your city. This is your family. But if you come, I promise to take care of you,’ Meghnad said and he meant it.

For the first time to a woman, after a long time, he meant the words he said.

‘To be with you, in sickness and in health, I promise you,’ Meghnad smiled.

Prameela looked at him and Meghnad wished he could know what she was thinking right now.

If only …

‘I was wondering when you would ask me this.’ Prameela smiled.

And Meghnad beamed brightly as he held out his hand. Prameela grabbed it

and swung herself up on to the back of the stallion.

Kumbhkaran gave a surprised chuckle, before galloping towards the exit gates of the underground city with Meghnad behind him.

‘I’ll show you a secret exit. The one where we are going would be blocked.’ Prameela began to direct the uncle and the nephew.

Meghnad smiled, as he had the leash of the stallion in his hand, with the arms of the Naga princess wrapped around his waist.

But he also knew that this action of theirs, would lead to more issues than solutions.

And he was prepared to face them. For now, he was here, she was here with him and they were together.

33. Meghnad

Few days had gone by.

And he had been resting on his bed — broken, torn apart. He had bandages wrapped around his body, Ayurvedic ointments massaged across his bruises. Meghnad was always a runner, and because of that, he would be saved from most attacks. But here … here, he was scorched and wounded.

Many had come in and gone by till then to check on him, sitting next to his bed. One of them was Kumbhkaran, who had his armour on him, as he sat down and said, ‘Kid, how do you feel?’

Meghnad’s vision was a little blurry since he just came out of sleep. ‘I feel beautiful.’

Kumbhkaran chuckled. ‘Do you know what you have done?’

‘For the sake of you and me, I’ve been here. It was my doppelgänger if something had happened.’

‘I’m talking about Prameela, kid.’

‘Ah, that.’

‘You shouldn’t have done that. It complicates things.’

‘Complicates how?’ Meghnad didn’t recall Prameela, taking care of him. And he wished in his heart she had.

‘You’ll know. Your father will discuss with you.’ He smiled. ‘I’ll be at the lab, if you think of waking up. I’m going again for that six month detox, which I usually do.’

Meghnad nodded. He knew about Kumbhkaran and his scientific retreat — going down to the basement to work on inventions. That was his job and his hobby, his passion. But seeing such a giant not available in most conquests, the opposing party would make jokes about him, saying he was sleeping for six months, when the reality was that he was always working.

The enemies always ridicule with partial knowledge.

Kumbhkaran left and Meghnad shifted on his bed, when he heard Kumbhkaran speaking to someone outside. ‘He’s awake.’

And lo and behold, the ‘someone’ entered.

Prameela. Her eyes were deep and shining as she smiled at him. She was so beautiful — full eyes, curved mouth, a cute nose, untied hair and fair, cherub skin. ‘You were close to dying, till we reached here,’ she said.

‘That’s my usual day. Without close death encounters, I don’t feel satisfied,’ Meghnad smiled.

Prameela laughed, as she sat beside him.

‘What did you do for so long? I don’t remember since everything is a blur,’ Meghnad said.

‘I was tense. I took care of you and roamed around Lanka. Your father is quite nice, though.’ Prameela said. ‘He seems quite educated. He was showing me his library.’

‘Yeah, well, he’s a showoff,’ Meghnad snorted. He knew Dashanan who was born from the sage Pulastya, became a scholar at a young age and was considered a prodigy for he was good with musical instruments, warfare techniques and was exceptionally tough.

He was different than most Rakshasas since he was educated and learned while others weren’t and that gave him an advantage. And he passed that sort of discipline on to his lineage and his people, his soldiers. He had more Manav sages and teachers than one Tribal ruler could fathom.

‘Your brother, Atikaya is great. He was showing me his trident and telling me what a bozo you are,’ she chuckled.

‘Well, he’s a showoff too and mean … don’t forget mean.’ Meghnad defended himself. ‘Wait till you meet Akshaya, though. He’s a sweetheart.’

‘Your mother, on the other hand, was cold towards me.’

‘Perhaps she knows about the circumstances, since you came here.’ Meghnad said.

Her smile faded. ‘I was thinking about that. Apparently, my father thinks you kidnapped me. He’s planning an army to get me back.’

‘He’s dramatic,’ Meghnad sighed. ‘Who told you this?’

‘Commander Kumbhkaran.’

Meghnad nodded. Kumbhkaran is good at getting such kind of miserable news. He had not woken up for an hour, and he was already bombarded with distressing news. ‘What did he suggest after telling you this?’

‘To send a letter and tell him that I am here willingly.’

‘What did you do?’ Meghnad was worried.

She arched her brows. ‘I posted that letter two days back, my love.’

Meghnad beamed. He liked that … very much. ‘So you are here for good, eh?’ He chuckled, as his bones hurt a little.

‘Yes, I am and I feel I betrayed my city even though it was the other way

round.’ She ran her fingers on his cheek. ‘Perhaps down the years, I can explain to him why I left.’

‘I would like that explanation right now,’ slyly Meghnad added.

‘You wish, my love,’ she winked, leaving the bed and tying her hair in a ponytail.

Meghnad offered her his hand. She held it and Meghnad kissed the top of it. ‘I know you are afraid, even though you don’t show it. But I promise you this decision of yours, you won’t regret it.’

Prameela narrowed her eyes. ‘I know.’

There was a knock on the door. And a head peeked in. It was a guard. ‘My lord, your father wishes your presence. He’s in his study.’

Meghnad nodded and then turned to Prameela. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘Atikaya apparently wants some guidance over some tricks in impressing women of his taste. I’m going to teach him.’ Prameela said. ‘Come to the courtyard, when it’s over. I would like to walk with you.’

As the soldier left the room, closing the door behind him, Prameela came close and whispered: ‘I met Lady Sita from Mithila. Your father has kidnapped her. You must talk to him about it. It’s wrong.’

Meghnad didn’t understand why even though his father was happily married, he would go capture another man’s wife. He knew who Sita was married to — Raghav. He agreed to talk about it and as Prameela left, he came on his feet, wearing his wooden sandals. He was bare-chested and wore only a dhoti. He wore a shawl around his neck, as he came out of the room, staggering to his father’s study. And while he did so, he recalled the things he had done in the past — *what have I done to deserve a girl like Prameela?*

He opened the door of the study, to see his father working at his table, with a quill in his hand, which he dipped in his inkpot. He looked up and shook his head in dismay.

Meghnad had seen his father all his life and every time he did, a shiver would run down his spine. For some reason, the man had an aura that would scare anyone. He was not as tall as Kumbhkaran, but he was broad and he had hair over his face, and crystal grey eyes with a searing gaze.

‘I sent you …’ he flipped through pages as he signed the documents, ‘… to get married and in return, you bring that woman without consent and with an apprehending army advancing on our backs.’

Meghnad smiled, as he casually sat down on the chair opposite. ‘Nagas can’t do anything. They have nothing.’

‘I know. But still. Now, we can’t maintain relations with them. And I heard from Kumbhkaran that the Naagmani was radioactive?’ He raised his brows.

‘And you left it back there and brought her instead? How utterly disappointing, son!’

Meghnad shrugged. ‘She was worth it.’

He paused. ‘Do you love her?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You love her.’ He announced, shaking his head. ‘This is worse. I can’t let one of the most brilliant minds of my empire be shaken by a … woman!’

Meghnad arched his brows. ‘Sir, by all means, you have taken a woman for yourself too.’

Dashanan came on his feet, pushing his chair back as he leaned forward. ‘Son, who do you speak about?’

‘Sita,’ Meghnad was not afraid of his father. And he remained still, in his chair.

‘You don’t know the circumstances.’

‘Mum would be very unhappy.’

‘How do you know about her? About Sita?’

‘I’ve heard rumours,’ Meghnad shrugged, ‘the great king of Lanka fell in love with a princess and abducted her.’

‘She’s not …’ he shook his head. ‘She’s your sister, son.’

Meghnad felt a tremor run down his spine. ‘And how do you know that?’

‘The ruby she wears, it’s a family heirloom. She didn’t know about it until Meenakshi pointed it out.’

Meghnad couldn’t believe he had a sister. And it was just weird to even think about it. ‘And have you told her?’

‘I don’t have the guts to tell her,’ he shook his head, hands at the back. ‘I don’t know why. She’s spiteful. She has closed her doors and doesn’t want to speak to anyone.’

‘Prameela met her,’ Meghnad bit his lips. ‘Perhaps she can. She’s a woman.’

‘What does your lady love possess that your mother doesn’t?’ Dashanan referred to Mandodari, who might have gone and tried talking to Sita.

‘Mum is old. Prameela and Sita might be of the same age. They might understand each other. I can talk to her about it.’

Dashanan nodded. ‘You can, and it’s a good idea but it becomes more embarrassing since I needed your advice. What do we do with her father?’

‘What about him? Leave him be, he’ll be fine.’

‘I wish it was that easy. We can’t have another warring kingdom especially since Bharat is already our enemy.’

‘Then what do you plan to do?’ Meghnad clenched his jaw.

Dashanan sighed. ‘Kumbhkaran says to burn Naaglok to ashes.’

That would mean … killing Prameela's father.

'And I believe that's right,' Dashanan nodded to himself. 'It's easy for us to do so as well since Naaglok is quite weak in comparison to Ayodhya. What do you think? It's on you. I leave it to you.'

'Why me?' He asked. 'Can't you make a decision?'

'You brought her here. Now you deal with how we handle her family. I agree with Kumbhkaran. But what about you?'

Meghnad thought about it for a moment. If he left Ananth, he would be a spiteful man who could take revenge any time. And if he killed him, any possibility of a surprise attack would go away, but Prameela would never talk to him — in fact, she would hate him.

'You killed Indra too,' said Dashanan, adding to his statement. 'You made sure he died because you didn't want him to leave unscathed. You knew that he'll return to kill you. I believe we should burn our bridges, if we can't mend them. We gave them one chance for an alliance and they didn't take it, so we have every right to destroy them.'

'And I have to execute that just like I did with Indra?'

'Of course,' he walked around his table and patted his son on the shoulder. 'You are the finest, most intelligent warrior I have.'

Meghnad thought about it. But he knew one thing. It was a beginning to something fruitful, something substantial in his life with Prameela.

And he couldn't potentially screw it up.

He took his father's hand and dropped it from his shoulder, as he stood opposite to him, squaring. 'No, Father. I believe we should let Ananth live. Let Naaglok live.'

Dashanan clenched his jaw and Meghnad could see he didn't like that. 'All right, but I hope you don't regret it. I hope *we* don't regret it.'

Meghnad nodded. Even though he was confident, he also knew doing something out of love — was dangerous.

And before he could respond to his father, there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' Dashanan ordered, his eyes still fixed on Meghnad.

The guard peeked in. 'My lord, there is an update.'

'Yes?'

'Lady Meenakshi has arrived.'

Dashanan turned his gaze from Meghnad to the guard, confused. In fact, even Meghnad was confused.

'She bears sad news.'

And then Meghnad and Dashanan shared a glance.

34. Laxman

It had been days and nothing had happened.

The city was being rebuilt after the attack. Civilians were given compensations. Vali's supporters were either forced to join or killed outside the premises of the kingdom. Sugreev enjoyed and reveled in his new found glory.

And Laxman waited with Raghav.

Meenakshi had left for Lanka and before going she had said, 'I plan to stay there when you attack, so I can guide you, how to go about it once you enter.' And she had a point, but it was not good enough.

But Laxman didn't have control over her actions and when they bid her goodbye, Raghav had said, 'We are lucky to have her. Without her, we wouldn't have reached till here.'

That was a few days ago.

And even though they had reached here, nothing substantial was happening.

Laxman and Raghav were walking towards the palace, which was now constructed to look bigger and more palatial than it was during Vali's time. The Vanar guards stood outside the gates and they instantly stopped them.

'I would like to meet King Sugreev.' Laxman said, while Raghav remained calm behind him.

'He's busy, my lord.'

'Busier than meeting the very men who helped him.'

'He's with Queen Tara,' the guard said.

Sugreev had laid claims on Vali's wife — Tara, who was once upon a time a crush of Sugreev's. And while he was enjoying in the wake of Vali's death, Laxman was in a hurry to go off to Lanka. He wanted stuff to happen immediately. They had risked their lives for it.

And before he could bash the guard for stopping him, he heard someone from the back: 'Lord Raghav and Master Laxman,' it was an elegant voice.

Laxman turned to see Bajrang, who had been helping the city with constructions and distribution of work to the civilians. He was Sugreev's chief and he was close to the king, as a brother.

‘What happened?’ He asked.

Before Laxman could burst out in anger, Raghav said, ‘We want King Sugreev’s audience, but he’s unable to meet us, Bajrang.’

Bajrang nodded. He looked at the guards and dismissed them from the gates. ‘How dare you stop Lord Raghav from entering, idiots. Get away from my sight.’

The guards grunted and left.

Bajrang opened the gates, walking past Laxman and Raghav and then bowed before them. ‘I apologise, my lord. These men don’t know who you are.’ He gestured at the saffron shawl with which Raghav hid his symbol.

Raghav nodded but Laxman still didn’t like this. He was being treated like an outsider. *They* were. As they walked in to the court, where the throne sat, they saw the man himself: Sugreev, hunched, sat on his chair and was talking to a Vanar woman who was herself hairy all over but had deep, purplish fur around her neck.

Tara.

Looking at them, Sugreev instantly stood up. ‘My lords!’ He exclaimed and when he did, Laxman saw Tara just stood up and left her seat, as if she was least interested in Sugreev’s presence.

At least we aren’t the only ones who hate him.

Sugreev walked, with a colourful robe, jewelled neck from which he hung his medallions and signet rings which he wore in all his fingers, while sitting on a golden-crested throne. Vali had possessed none of these materialistic things and the more he looked at the buffoonery of Sugreev, Laxman regretted toppling Vali from his throne.

‘Where have you been all these days?’ Sugreev asked, wide-eyed.

‘Your men stop us from entering whenever we come.’ Laxman gritted his teeth. ‘If it wasn’t for the benevolent Bajrang here, we would have been stranded outside.’

At that, Sugreev shot Bajrang a look of contempt but then again grinned, showing his greasy teeth. ‘My men are stupid but Bajrang … he’s a follower of Vishnu, thus your ardent follower too, Lord Raghav. How can I be of service?’

Raghav remained impassive and Laxman could feel his brother was getting angry. ‘You can start by sticking to your word.’

‘Word?’

‘Helping us save Sita,’ Laxman arched his brows. ‘Or have you forgotten?’

‘Of course not, my lord!’ He slapped his hands together, and Laxman could feel he had. ‘You see, I had been terribly busy with all the shenanigans here, be it the development of the community or helping the society. Give me a few more

days, my lord, while I handle the issues that pertain to this city. Please understand, I need to gain control of my own city as well. I need to develop it before I can help Lady Sita. I have no intention of not helping you at all.'

Raghav asked, 'What kind of development?'

'We are having a major food crisis. Vali was not looking after this kingdom in the right way, my lord,' Sugreev began. 'He spent too much on entertainment — his favourite was wrestling. We have to break that stadium and build an educational centre in that place. There are lots of things yet to happen.'

Laxman came forward, towering over the hunched king when Raghav's hand came on his shoulder.

'We give you two days. If by then …' Laxman began, '… you don't do anything about it then …' and he really didn't have any leverage. 'Then you shall hear from us again and it won't be as pleasant as it was now.'

35. Suparnika

This has to be played smartly.

Meenakshi was standing in the court room, but instead of having ministers and its people, it was empty. She was looking at the throne, which lay in front of her — there were large banners that hung, the drapes which had the sigil of the Rakshas Empire. Kaikesi, her mother used to teach her all about the royal affairs, of how exactly it went.

And it was right in this room.

The interior echoed and in the back, she saw the doors of the courtroom opening. Meenakshi turned to see Dashanan and his favourite son, Meghnad, entering. And it felt like a punch in the gut, when she saw the child.

He used to be close to her before …

Before he let Vidhyut die.

Meenakshi flared her nostrils as she turned to Meghnad and Dashanan, who looked very worried. The moment he saw Meenakshi, he hugged her; he was in his dhoti, with a loose, black tunic. Meenakshi hugged him back, as Dashanan said, ‘You have left your duties in Janasthan and come here. Why?’

‘Because there is no use, my brother, since I am the bearer of bad news.’

He arched his brows.

‘I mean to say,’ Meenakshi walked away from both of them, showing her back, and said, ‘Vali has been killed. Kishkindha is under Sugreev’s rule.’

She didn’t hear any response but when she turned she could see the haunted, shocked face of Dashanan — his strongest ally had been put down. ‘He was helped by Raghav and Laxman.’ She looked at Meghnad, who remained impassive rather than aghast.

Meghnad came forward. ‘And what about Akshaya?’

And that was when Meenakshi sighed because this was not planned. She had no idea Akshaya was part of Vali’s army and when she saw his corpse amongst many, she couldn’t help but cry in the corner. He was just a naive boy and he wasn’t supposed to be a part of Dashanan’s fall.

But then, what did she expect? If Dashanan has to fall, surely his children

would be axed too. And even his wife.

And maybe even herself.

Then at the last moment, when everyone is going to perish, I will reveal my plan.

Meenakshi didn't answer Meghnad, but rather to Dashanan. 'He's no more, unfortunately, at least that's what my reports say.'

And Dashanan fell on the ground, tears in his eyes, as he began to smack his arms on the ground. Meghnad, instantly went to comfort his father, and even though his bloodshot eyes suspiciously watched Meenakshi, he could see her tears too. Not because she had to act, but because she genuinely felt sad.

But that doesn't mean she couldn't save herself. The only reason she had travelled all the way here was to show to Dashanan, that she was still on his side before any other person told him that she was not innocent.

Meenakshi knew one thing — the death of Akshaya meant the harbinger of change. Now things would begin to topple. As Raghav would march with Sugreev's army and Dashanan would prepare his defence against him …

The war Meenakshi had planned when Vidhyut had died, the downfall of the Rakshas Empire that she had dreamt of ever since, had *begun.*

36. Prameela

She knew something was wrong with Meghnad, when he didn’t come to the courtyard.

And Prameela had been feeling lonely ever since she left her home, her father, her half-sister Anjani — it was like leaving her world and coming to an alien place. And it was tough. She couldn’t share her thoughts with Meghnad, because, well … he had just healed and it would have been unfair on her side to trouble him immediately.

She had to put on a brave face, trying to please herself in the overly sensitised environment of Lankapuri. Unlike the bards’ narration, Lanka was anything but a devil’s paradise. It was actually pretty decent. They had normal people, in normal clothes and having ordinary conversations. There were mandals which were the administrative centres where the politicians of the state rested in dome-shaped buildings. There were the beautiful, conical shaped towers which were used as lookouts, walls which had figures designed and flora that was multicoloured in nature. Poverty was less, because of the many charities funded by the government. Dashanan was clear that he wouldn’t want the elite sucking on the poor and she felt nice that what she always thought of was being implemented here.

In fact, Dashanan the great Raavan was a reader and quite docile, instead of being the devil. The only odd thing was Sita. When she had passed her room, she heard few of the guards talking about her — how she got abducted because Dashanan had lusted over her.

But seeing Dashanan, it didn’t feel right. He didn’t seem like that. He was bookish and he was noble. He spoke eloquently and had a little bit of an ego problem which she noticed, when they had a discussion about a book and she gave a critique which he thought he should have known before.

Prameela straightened herself, and after talking to Atikaya, she made her way towards the palace — this time, right away walking to Dashanan’s study room and knocking on the door. She opened it when no one answered, and saw it was isolated.

Weren't they supposed to be here?

She walked back to Meghnad's room, while glancing at the eloquent and beautiful jewels that circled the corners and crevices of the corridor. The one thing about this palace was — it had the sheen and a glimmer of eloquent tastes.

It was said that Vishwamitra, Indra's architect, was forced by Sumali to make Lanka the royal palace in Lankapuri, which was the capital of Lanka.

She finally opened the door and found Meghnad, leaning against his bed, on the ground, thoughtfully musing and humming an old tune.

She could see he was in tears and she wanted to ask why, but she closed the door behind her and bit her lips, choosing her words carefully. Meghnad looked up and gave the saddest smile she had ever seen.

The man who destroyed empires was so … vulnerable. She could have never imagined that. And perhaps, that was something that attracted her towards him more.

'You know, when he had a stroke …' Meghnad began, '… I was the one who took care of him, day and night. People say, you don't have a favourite sibling, but you do, deep down. Akshaya was the one and it's so depressing that I couldn't share this fact with him.'

Atikaya had talked to her about Akshaya at length — the youngest of Dashanan's son, good with archery, had a stroke when he was young, and before everything else, he was a talented musician.

'What happened?'

'You know,' he was trying his best to not cry and his nose was red from rubbing it too much.

Prameela came close to Meghnad and sat next to him. She made him keep his head on her shoulders and ran her fingers down his scalp. 'Who was it?'

And Meghnad told her, the little he knew from his Aunt Meenakshi. The bards in her castle back in Naaglok used to call her Suparnika for she had long, cruel nails with which she used to hurt her enemies. But here … it was just Meenakshi. It's funny how the other empires made up these stories. Perhaps here, her father would be the evil Naga snake.

'So Sita is your sister?' She asked the one question that seemed to stick out like a thorn in his entire story, when he told her how Dashanan had kidnapped Sita, believing her to be his daughter as she possessed a family heirloom.

'I think so. I don't know. I don't care, to be honest, but my father wants her to accept her destiny. So much happens in this world but so little actually matters.' He rubbed his eyes. 'But still … talk to her, will you?'

Prameela nodded. She didn't know how she would do it, but she would figure it out, one way or the other.

‘Father doesn’t want me to attack Sugreev out of haste and out of revenge.’ He continued. ‘He says it’s detrimental. What’s done is done. We have to prepare properly and plan it out. Personally, I feel like severing the head of that Raghav and putting his limbs inside his mouth. And Sugreev too — that baboon. He had no right to take my brother’s life.’

Prameela said, ‘Your anger might cause you to do something stupid. Be careful.’ She paused. ‘What is the plan?’

‘I don’t know. We will set up a council meeting and plans have to be made, spies have to be sent. I want to make the most powerful Astra yet, so I can blow up that baboon’s army. I want to kill each and every Vanar out there, so they know the pain I went through.’ He spoke in anger, gritting his teeth and Prameela saw the darker side of his character.

Prameela clasped his hand. ‘But would that bring Akshaya back?’

‘What do you suggest then?’

‘Always assess the situation before letting your emotions drive them. Your father, who you told, believes in not killing out of revenge for the one who is killed is killed by his own karma and he has a point. If we begin killing each other, out of spite, wouldn’t the world be filled with chaos? He’s making a difference, by believing that,’ Prameela explained.

‘I know. I know you are bloody right but should I remain silent? It’s just sad you know …’ Meghnad began diverting from the topic, ‘It’s just that you want to tell someone you love them when they are alive, but you don’t because you take *time* for granted. And when time finally gets hold of you, wraps its deathly fingers over your throat and takes the very thing you love, you realise that you should have done the needful a lot earlier. I believe people shouldn’t wait to tell the ones they love, that they love them.’ He looked up at Prameela and they shared a deep, passionate look. ‘I don’t want to take time for granted, anymore, my dear. I believe we can die tomorrow. And I don’t want to live in a world where we both are not married.’

Prameela raised her brows.

‘Akshaya wanted to see me married.’ Tears brimmed from his eyes. ‘He thought it’ll be good for me, he thought it would help me grow and he was right.’ He ran his fingers on her cheeks. ‘I do feel different. I am not … well … I wasn’t used to being like this around women — sad and depraved and just depressing, but with you, I find this warmth that I cannot get anywhere else. Am I being selfish by saying this?’

Prameela kissed him on the forehead. ‘You are being cheesy, all right? But sweet, though. I left my home to be with you for a reason, Meghnad. Because I felt something I never did with any other person. I felt the warmth you talk

about.’

‘From me? I’m the most cold-hearted devil out there.’ He chuckled.

‘Let’s do a proper, formal ceremony. I want to be married to you.’

Meghnad smiled and they embraced, as she wrapped her arms around him. And then he pulled back, when he said, ‘Uh, I should say one thing?’

‘What?’

A smile came on his face, as he struggled with pulling up the corners of his lips. ‘Rakshasas don’t really have a wedding ceremony. I mean, they are just known for abducting women and …’

Prameela slapped him on the shoulder. And he chuckled. She was glad he was finding little specks of happiness with her even though sadness enveloped his world.

That would be quite all right … for now.

37. Laxman

He knew he heard something in the dead of the night.

Laxman opened his eyes to hear the soft snoring of his brother, who was a few feet away, sleeping on a comfortable bed. A study table separated their cots, on which a small lamp burnt. He grabbed hold of it and started walking outside, into the darkness and he saw at the exit of his bamboo hut, that the noises or the sounds were coming from the palace itself.

They were strange noises of harps and lyres. Laxman knew this since he had been exposed to his fair share of musical instruments in his childhood. His mother always used to encourage him to get into music rather than into fights and duels. But Laxman loved the art of archery instead and followed his passion.

He looked back at his sleeping brother and then at the palace. Sighing, he began walking towards it, hoping to understand what was happening.

He reached the staircase where he saw the guards chatting outside, grinning to themselves. When they saw Laxman, they instantly buzzed each other and came close to him.

‘Lord Laxman … you must go to sleep.’

Laxman could see the Vanar guard was drunk and high, with a bottle in his hand, collapsing on his step, nervous and red. He saw the other guards and they were hiccupping and their eyes were breezy.

Would this happen if Vali was alive?

The little he had seen in Vali’s regime, Kishkindha was sober and the regiment was disciplined because Vali, after all, was a disciplined man. Laxman came to the door, pushing aside the guard who instantly got hold of his hand … and Laxman pulled out the guard’s blade and pointed it at his head.

The guard was surprised by Laxman’s quickness and he backed off, with beady, glistening pupils under the moonlight.

Laxman opened the gates of the palace and he was met by purgatory. There were more than hundreds of Vanars, probably upper class with their smart dresses and jewels hanging around their necks and fingers, dancing to the music, drinking from their goblets. Laxman saw the dirty floors and disheveled ceilings.

He could hear the hoots and laughs, grins and chuckles of the men.

And his breathing quickened when he saw the guards, who were also drunk coming towards him, but Laxman, clutching on to his sword, instantly sliced the guard who was in front of him across the breastplate and pushed him in the crowd. But the crowd could care less, for they were busy enjoying.

Laxman didn't know where this kind of anger was coming from but he shouted: 'SUGREEV!'

His eyes darted at the man himself who couldn't hear Laxman's voice among all the hustle and bustle, who was on his throne on the other side of the room, with Tara on his lap. She was trying to push herself away from him, but he was not letting her. He had a white robe on and a crown over his head, with a chalice from which he sipped his liquor.

This is madness.

Laxman began to move forward and he was met by the guards, who tried to stop him. One of them said to him, 'My lord, you are not welcome here,' but Laxman could pay no less heed to the guard and instead just plummeted the hilt of the sword across the Vanar's nose, collapsing him with a bleeding nose.

Another came forward, and Laxman punched him in the stomach. He kept pushing the guards in the crowd, as he made his way out of it and the more he hurt the guards the more people noticed and began to move away from the raging Laxman.

As he came forward, Laxman could see Sugreev was still busy with Tara.

This man has no shame.

His eyes searched for Bajrang and he was not there. Probably because he was the only decent person in Sugreev's rebellion.

Laxman turned to the candles that were in the corner to shower light in the palace's common hall and he walked up to it. He grabbed the waxed candles and tossed it across the hanging drapes which caught on to the fire of Sugreev's sigil. As the fire began to spread wildly, the people in the crowd horrifically watched and started rushing out of the palace, falling on top of each other, yelling and shrieking as the orange glow behind Laxman grew concrete.

Sugreev saw this and instantly pushed Tara away from him. She ran for her life … from the fire or him, he wasn't sure.

As Sugreev stood on his feet, watching the empty hall of his throne room which blazed, Laxman came forward, grabbing hold of his sword and pushing him down on his seat.

'What … what … what are you doing, man?' shrieked Sugreev, with a blade this close to his neck.

Laxman pushed it deeper in his fur. 'I believe you were trying to build this

city. I apologise for interrupting your … such …' he looked back at the fallen liquor goblets, '… noble purposes. But I think from tomorrow you shall focus less on your *reparations* of the city and more on your promise to us.'

Sugreev swallowed a lump in his throat and Laxman could see he was angry. 'I know you are raging inside that how a king of your high calibre is being treated, Your Highness. But frankly, I don't care.'

Sugreev nodded. 'You didn't have to burn my drapes, man.' He muttered nervously.

Laxman pushed him back on the throne as he walked away. Perhaps sweet words in this world have become understated.

Perhaps violence is the only way to reach the means.

38. Suparnika

A few years earlier …

From far, the man looked different.

First of all, he was bigger than most of the people around here — broader and tall, more than Dashanan, with a thick ponytail held together with a tiny bamboo string. He had a tight tunic around his thick waist, with burly inked arms which had strange designs. He had thick bushy brows and a patch across his one eye.

He was standing at the shore, helping the fishermen to gather the fish and putting them on the cart. Directing them like a boss, Meenakshi knew he was important around here.

But who gave him the permission to do so? This was the outskirts of Lanka, but it was, after all, under her brother's jurisdiction.

'Do you know him?' Meenakshi asked her nephew — the tall and slim boy of twenty, Meghnad. He had short hair and was clean shaven.

'No idea,' Meghnad raised his brows.

They had been travelling to the outskirts to get a good variety of fish for themselves and they knew what they would get in the city wouldn't be as good as what they would get here, plucked right from the sea without any adulteration. Having spare time up their sleeves, they roamed around with a dozen or so guards, following them for protection.

'I have to buy some tokens for Akshaya,' said Meghnad, 'some stringed seashells and a pearl necklace, Aunty.'

'Pearl necklace for Akshaya?' She grinned, as she grabbed hold of her nephew's ears, who immediately started groaning. 'When will you stop lying to me, dear?'

'Okay, okay sorry.'

She left his ear. 'Who's the new girl?'

'Uh,' Meghnad scratched his hair nervously. 'Well, she's just a handmaiden, but you know … she knew I was coming to the shores … so umm … she asked me to get something for her. She's just someone I'm trying to, you know … impress.'

‘Good,’ she smiled. ‘Always remember that you need to treat her with respect, all right? Otherwise I’ll personally come and slap you.’

Meghnad chuckled, but he looked scared. ‘But Father says if you like someone, you just get them. Perks of being a prince.’

‘But cons to being a gentleman. Consent of a woman is of importance and if she doesn’t like it, you don’t pursue it. Your father is an idiot. He always was,’ Meenakshi said.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ He nodded diligently and rushed to get some pearls.

Meenakshi began walking in the fisherman’s market where her feet sunk in the dirty sands. The smell of fishes and the sea breeze engulfed her nostrils, while the air was warm and pleasant. She gazed at a red fish that was cut into pieces in one of the shacks and she asked, ‘How much is this for?’ It looked fresh and meaty.

‘You might not want to have that, my lady,’ came a husky voice from the corner.

She didn’t look up but from the corner of her eyes, she could see it was the man she had seen earlier. ‘And why is that?’

‘It’s salmon. It has lesser nutrients,’ said the man.

Meenakshi didn’t want to share a glance with him, because she was afraid of showing her eyes and getting judged by him.

‘You might want to have a cod though?’ He picked it up from the next shack and showed it to her.

‘Hmm.’

Meenakshi didn’t say anything but took the fish from him and started inspecting it. ‘I would like a pound of that.’

‘There are other good kinds too. There’s mackerel, perch, sardines, rainbow trout,’ he began showing the white, dark and multi-coloured fishes and explaining each variety that was available.

Meenakshi didn’t say much, as she was avoiding his gaze as much as she could, and taking the ones she thought looked firm and fresher than the others. By the end of it, she remarked, ‘Thank you for your guidance. You are quite knowledgeable.’

‘Well, this is my livelihood, my lady.’

‘Selling fish?’

‘To work close to the sea. It’s my passion. Where I come from, fishes aren’t something we generally eat.’ He said, and she could hear his voice deepen and she loved that. She loved a man with a good voice.

‘Where are you from?’

‘I will tell you if you look at me, my lady. I assure you, I am not ugly.’

Meenakshi tightened her jaw. ‘I must leave, sir.’ And then as she moved away she was struck by a thought. *Why am I afraid to show my face? I should be proud of it.* She turned and looked straight — his brusque features, golden eyes, slight stubble and cream-like skin with a dark patch strapped across his right eye — the man was undeniably rugged and handsome.

‘And I assure you …’ he said, without caring about her cross-eyes, ‘… you are beautiful. Are you a princess? Of which region?’

‘Lankapuri,’ Meenakshi smiled.

‘Lady Meenakshi,’ he said, like he knew her. ‘What a delight,’ he took her hand and kissed it.

Meenakshi couldn’t help but grin. *God, I’m acting like a child.* ‘And you are?’

That was when she heard it.

Stallions had entered the market. Men with scars and battle plates, armours and shields, entered the fisher’s market with their spears and swords aimed at her. When they saw Meenakshi, they immediately retreated and Meenakshi knew who they were — her brother’s men.

‘My lady! We saw the royal carriage but we didn’t know you would be here,’ said the frontman of the guards.

‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘We have come here to take this refugee with us,’ He gestured to the man she was talking to, who looked worried. ‘We have learnt he’s been working on the shores illegally and he’s not from here.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Meenakshi gritted her teeth, coming in between them. ‘I’ll take the responsibility of getting him a work permit and he can pay the fine for not using it till now.’

The guard shook his head. ‘It’s not that easy, my lady. He’s … actually … umm …’ he looked at the other guards, nervously as if he needed some help from them.

‘I’m a Danav.’ The man announced, coming forward. ‘And I come from the island of Pataal.’

Meenakshi felt a chill run down her spine, when she heard it. The man was a Danav … and he wasn’t big like one. In fact, for a Danav, who were fifteen feet tall as people said, he was short and just like any other person there. But then his golden eyes were a dead giveaway and the colour of those irises could only come from the region of Pataal.

How could I be so ignorant?

But she also knew one thing. Danavs and Asuras were banned in Illavarti, let alone in Lanka as Dashanan hated these foreigners for destroying the sanctity and the purity of their land before the Rakshas Empire took over. The Rakshas

were homegrown, right down from the southern soil of Illavarti and they were the true leaders, not foreigners like Asuras and Devas.

The guards chained and roped the man, as they began to drag him away from her, but he was coolheaded and he turned his head and with a smile said, ‘The name’s Vidhyut Jihva.’

And he winked.

She didn’t know why, but her stomach did a somersault at that moment.

39. Meghnad

His wedding had to be postponed, for the funeral of Akshaya was taking place and then the mourning period didn't allow anyone to be engaged in marital affairs for some time.

A few days had passed since then and Meghnad walked down the stairs of Kumbhkaran's lab, which lay right under his dome-shaped house.

As he descended, the smell was deep and dense, almost hitting him in the nostrils, making him feel disgusted and nauseous. With the corners of his tunic, he covered his mouth to see a large room with tables, stools and chairs dedicated to large tubes made of glass, clay pots, jars that were also hand crafted with glass to see the contents which lay inside. There were so many chemicals inside the room, which were the reasons for the smell.

I have spent my childhood here.

Meghnad looked at Kumbhkaran who was working with a white cloak over his fat and large body, as he carefully used the chemicals to transform the properties of the Soma Stones, unaffected by the smell, probably because he has lived here long enough. He was the only one successful in engineering the Somalata plants and using its juice.

'Are you here to nag me for not coming to the funeral?' Kumbhkaran looked up from his work and at Meghnad, his eyes bulging out and he looked exhausted, as if he hadn't slept.

'Why? Hasn't my father nagged you enough?'

'Your mother did. She was quite disappointed in me. But you know that I take a six month retreat for a reason, from everything and as much as I grieve Akshaya's early demise, the work has to continue, otherwise Lanka will stop flourishing.' Kumbhkaran defended himself.

'I understand,' Meghnad quietly responded, as he knew Kumbhkaran — a man of practicality and hard work and of discipline. He hadn't participated in his brother's conquests most of the time because he was busy downstairs, working here in his stinking lab. 'I really don't understand the concept of funerals, so I get why you don't want to come.' He paused. 'Tell me, was my father always

like this?'

'What did he do now?'

'He is preparing to attack Kishkindha and bring down Sugreev, but not because of Akshaya's death, but because he's losing control over Illavarti.' Meghnad gritted his teeth.

'Your father doesn't do what he does out of revenge, kid. You know that very well. And to be honest, it has worked for him so far.' Kumbhkaran walked up to Meghnad, leaving his work and then patting his nephew on the shoulder. 'I know you miss him, kid. I miss him too. But we need to move on.'

'Did you move on too when your son left you and Aunty upstairs for the life of a Pisach?' Meghnad asked, rather softly. He knew about his cousin Nikumbha, who had begun to love the ways of the Pisach — the man-eating Tribe, who lived in forests and were nomads. Nikumbha was always strange, as a boy, not speaking while growing up, and it was evident that he would do something uncertain. But leaving his family for a cannibalistic tribe seemed quite extreme.

'Yes, I did,' Kumbhkaran tightened his jaw. 'It was his choice and I don't have any say in it.' He returned to his table, as he sat down and resumed work.

'How did you? I mean, move on?'

'It's life,' Kumbhkaran shrugged. 'And it happens. Life perishes. Inventions don't and that's why I love being innovative.'

'What are you working on?'

Kumbhkaran grinned, as he patted the seat next to him. Meghnad sat on it, and looked at the table in front. What lay on it, was a Chintamani Stone — the same crystal ball, a Soma Stone and a blueish crystal ball.

'Wait a minute …' Meghnad widened his eyes, '… isn't that Naagmani?'

'Oh yeah, it is.'

'So you stole it?' Meghnad gasped.

'I was meaning to tell you but my mind had begun to race when you told me it has potency. The day you were romancing with your future wife, I stole some from the mines.'

'And you didn't tell me?'

'I am telling you now, right?' He grinned. 'It's only a few. I don't think we can use it yet since only in testing it has taken me quite some time, but I have heated the three elements and put it in a pressure cube to mix it well and used its energies to form one.' He showed a whitish liquid that was in a small cuboid like box.

He took Meghnad to the corner, where there was a puppet made of hay and cotton. He held the box in his fist. 'See what it does,' he tossed the cube with

some force at the puppet. Instantly, the cube broke and a gas permeated around the puppet, which led to an instantly electrifying energy that stunned and burnt it down.

Meghnad saw it live and his eyes lit up with the blue electricity. When it died down, the puppet was no longer in good shape.

‘It can kill a person,’ Kumbhkaran declared. ‘And the box is made of sugar, and thus it has to be flung strongly at the person otherwise the magic won’t happen. Isn’t it grand, kid?’

Meghnad childishly nodded. Whenever he had felt low, he would see these magical scientific innovations and it would light his heart up.

‘I call it Naagpasha,’ Kumbhkaran said, ‘it stuns and electrifies the enemy like a snake’s bite would.’

‘I want to use it against the men who killed Akshaya,’ Meghnad said.

‘And you shall, but it needs a little bit more time.’

‘I want to help,’ Meghnad smiled.

‘Sure you can … sit down …’

And that was when they heard the loud knock on the basement doors. The doors opened and a guard entered. He was a messenger, who was panting as he said, ‘Prince Meghnad, Lady Prameela informed me you’ll be here. You are ordered by your father to come to the war room.’

Meghnad shared a nervous glance with Kumbhkaran and came forward. ‘What happened?’

‘They have caught sight of the rebel Vanar’s party in the outskirts of Lankapuri at Ashok Vatika,’ the guard said.

Lanka? What was a Vanar doing here?

‘Who is it? Anyone we are aware of?’ Kumbhkaran asked.

The guard shook his head yes. ‘They’ve identified him as Sugreev’s right-hand man. He goes by the name of Hanuman.’

40. Prameela

She had to meet her somehow.

Not only because Meghnad wanted her to talk to Sita, but because there was something not right — the story of Sita Maa being Dashanan's daughter didn't fit. One of the reasons was that even though her father had found her close to the furrow and she was an orphan, she was later on revealed to be a part of the Mleccha family that had remained close to Mithila, in its outskirts.

She had learnt all of that from her city in Naaglok, hearing rumours and indulging in gossips of the city nobles.

The door was shut while the two guards flocked outside, securing the room. Prameela walked to them and as the guards saw her, they straightened up.

'Lady Prameela,' one of them bowed with respect.

She was glad that people had begun to know her now. Even though there wasn't an official ceremony, Prameela was the new bride of the family. And even though it came with being around Meghnad, it also had its cons — one of them being how such a nice girl fell for a person like Meghnad. He was ruthless, evil and a person who supposedly spent his times with the escorts more than the respected women of the city.

And she had to swallow all of that in, because Meghnad was her partner. No matter, what they say about him, it was his past and she had to accept it.

'Has she left her room ever since she has been here?'

The guard shook his head. 'She hasn't, my lady.' He paused, looking at the other Rakshas guard before saying, 'Nor does she let anyone enter. We put food in through the gap between the floor and the door. And she returns us the plate. In the beginning, she wouldn't eat thinking it's poisoned, but I believe hunger got the better of her.'

Prameela nodded. 'Leave.'

'But my lady, we are ordered by King Dashanan …'

'Leave. For few minutes. You have scared her. Both of you.' She gave them a hard stare and they nodded, going to the other corridor.

Prameela knocked on the door and put her ears against it to hear something on

the other end, but there was no sound. She knocked again and said softly, ‘Lady Sita, my name is Prameela, I’m the princess of Naaglok. I seek your audience for we both are in the same situation. I was …’ she paused for a moment, but she had to say it, ‘… I was also abducted from my home. I was brought here by Raavan’s son, Indrajit. I am afraid and I need someone who I can talk to.’

There was silence.

Still? I thought it would have worked.

And then, she heard it. There was the sound of footsteps before the door opened and she saw a brown-skinned girl who had smeared kohl and had applied berry colour on her lips. She had been crying, by the looks of it and she was looking absolutely disheveled. She looked at Prameela, from top to bottom and then made way for her to enter.

Prameela calmly did, holding on to her chunni, covering her face partly. ‘My lady,’ she bowed. ‘I have heard great things about your husband, Lord Raghav and your father, King Janak. I apologise for what happened to you.’

Sita nodded. ‘And to you as well. What’s your story?’ She made Prameela sit on the scattered bed while Prameela’s eyes darted at the windows, which were grilled, perhaps so that she won’t escape.

Prameela began to tell her story and she made up hers, as much as she could — lying her way through it. Sita listened calmly and for a woman who had been trapped here, suffocated and claustrophobic, she displayed a great sense of patience. When Prameela’s tale was over, Sita began: ‘I feel for you, Lady Prameela. But do not fear.’ A smile danced on her lips. ‘My husband is on his way.’

But wasn’t Dashanan going towards Kishkindha?

What’s going on?

‘You seem quite confident.’

‘I do, yes.’ She beamed. ‘I was met by a Vanar, who was sent by him. He’s on his way with his army to fight in Lanka.’

‘Vanar?’ She clenched her jaw. ‘How?’

‘He delivered it here. He had sneaked in. There were rumours that I was at Ashoka Vatika, and he had stationed himself close, but learnt I was still at the palace. So he came here, to deliver my husband’s ring and tell me that everything is fine.’ She explained.

Prameela arched her brows. So much had happened behind their backs, in the dead of night. ‘Who was it?’

‘Someone by the name of Bajrang.’

‘I see,’ Prameela nodded. ‘Do you know why you are here, Lady Sita?’

She frowned. ‘Of course, to get married to that monster. I don’t let him in.’

‘Who told you this?’

‘What else could be the reason for me being abducted by him? I don’t know him.’

Prameela looked at the ruby pendant, she wore around her neck. ‘Because he thinks you are his daughter.’

She laughed. ‘What an absurd thought. I was the daughter of …’ she bit her lips. ‘I mean, it’s absurd. What makes him think that way?’

Prameela pointed towards the ruby.

‘This?’ She chuckled. ‘This was given by …’ and her smile dropped, while her face went white. ‘This is not mine, Lady Prameela.’ And then Prameela heard the truth. ‘It was given by Lady Meenakshi.’

41. Meghnad

He is here.

And I shall have my revenge.

The Ashoka Vatika was a sprawling botanical garden which had these Asoka plants — rare red-coloured shrubs that warmed the palace, a huge fountain in between and it was at the outskirts of Lankapuri, but far away from the shores of Lanka too. It was at the sweet spot of being undetectable here, since it had large enveloping canopies that intertwined with each other.

Meghnad was on the Vimana, being driven and glided through Atikaya. Dashanan had ordered him to go with Atikaya and get the man himself. Bajrang, the general to Sugreev, one of the many reasons behind Akshaya's death.

And as they neared the forests, they could see their army — the Rakshas royal guards with their weapons and growling teeth, brass helmets walking towards the red tents of the Vanars. Barriers of rocks were strewn in between, created by the Vanars, as they threw javelins and shot arrows. The Rakshasas pushed the rocks aside and began fighting with the Vanars.

Meghnad, at the back of the Vimana, pulled out the Naagpasha cube from the bag and grinned at Atikaya.

'For Akshaya,' Atikaya winked, with a sad smile.

Meghnad twirled one side of his moustache. 'For our brother,' and then he threw it on the ground.

The moment it hit the ground, a large, serpentine current of blue energy vapourised and stunned the Vanars who were part of the little area.

Lurching with his sword from the Vimana, Meghnad came on the battlefield, dust swirling around him, as he twirled the other side of his oily moustache.

He saw the snarling monkey men jumping and leaping from the tree branches as they began to throw javelins in his direction.

Rolling from one end to another, Meghnad used chakras that were attached to his belt and he began to swing it across them. Since it was made of iron, it grazed through the Vanars' skin, throwing them off guard.

A Vanar grabbed hold of Meghnad's throat from the back and Meghnad

elbowed him hard on the abdomen and used his sword, to stab the Vanar through the chest. As blood spurted high and wide on his face, he derived great satisfaction out of killing the Vanars without mercy.

He used another cube towards the incoming Vanars who were coming in dozens and rushing towards him, when he threw at them — as it broke, another wave of electric current stunned them.

Using the opportunity, he quickly began to decimate each and every stunned Vanar. Blood was spilled, guts were pulled out and Meghnad didn't show any mercy.

He liked it. He liked the killing.

And in the midst of the battlefield, he saw Akshaya waving at him and he stopped for a moment. His eyes teared up and he paused until Akshaya's hand lifted and his fingers were pointed towards him.

And then he realized he was pointing towards someone who came from behind and smacked Meghnad on the head.

For a moment, it was an absolute blur.

But he was not given the chance to wake up properly when he felt another, searing shot of pain in his stomach.

He opened his eyes to see a white-furred Vanar with his mace continuously pummeling him.

Meghnad stopped the next attack by using his legs and pushed the Vanar back. He came on his feet, rubbing his eyes as he saw the disfigured jaw on the Vanar. 'It's you, isn't it? The great Hanuman.'

'It's General Bajrang,' he calmly stated.

Meghnad saw the collision of the two armies around him — dust and dried leaves with scarlet blood flowing as well as the sound of bones crackling. He saw men from both sides losing and Bajrang and him — they were in the cusp of it.

'You are a pathetic, waste of mortality in this world, monkey,' he said. 'You are siding with the wrong men, the men who hurt children.'

Bajrang showed a slight moment of confusion and he brought his mace forward. With a quick reflex action, Meghnad deflected the mace with his blade.

'You are on the wrong side too. You side with those who abduct women.'

Meghnad came forward and swung his sword against the fur, but instantly moved back to confuse Bajrang.

And then he flipped out his chakra and he tossed it across the Vanar's neck, as it grazed him across his neck, making him bleed.

The Vanar, knelt in retreat. 'You are …' he coughed, as he held on to his bleeding neck, '… you are a meek and troubled magician, an illusionist. You are

weak. You are not a warrior.'

'How does it matter?' Meghnad grabbed hold of the Vanar's head. 'I won.'

'You wish,' Bajrang instantly leapt on Meghnad, as if the bleeding didn't affect him and he grappled with Meghnad, as he began to use his fists to smack him on the face.

Meghnad dodged a few attacks and to deflect them, he had his arms in front, to hide from the attack, when he pulled out a ball from his pocket and instantly smacked it on Bajrang's head.

The Vanar widened his eyes, as the puff of smoke generated out of the pocket caused everything to be blurred.

Meghnad got hold of the opportunity, using this as a way to get hold of the distracted Bajrang and putting himself on top of him. He punched him on the face repeatedly, to the point that Bajrang was bleeding from the face and went unconscious.

'You bloody … meek … little …' he punched him harder each time. 'Your brother, your allies … killed …'

Punch. Punch. PUNCH!

'MY BROTHER!'

The smoke dissipated and then he heard a voice: 'MEGHNAD!'

Meghnad, sweating profusely turned around, looking at Atikaya, who was wounded, but not enough. He was wide-eyed, as he said, 'It's over. We need to take him to Father.'

Meghnad ran his fingers through his hair, as he pushed Bajrang on the ground and stood up. He wiped his sweat as he saw the sprawling mess of corpses of both armies lined around him.

Most Vanars were arrested and held by the Rakshas guards and Meghnad ordered: 'Kill each one of them. Burn them. I don't care what you do, as long as you make them suffer.' The guards nodded in unison.

Meghnad looked back at Atikaya. And Atikaya looked at Meghnad.

Perhaps I have gone too far.

42. Suparnika

A few years earlier …

The hearing had begun.

The court comprised of nobles, politicians and lawyers and in the front sat Dashanan — her tall and broad, quiet brother. He was feared as Raavan by many prisoners. In the court, many would whimper and go feeble in his presence. But they didn't know how he began. They didn't know that before he was a king, he was a small boy rejected by his father and he had unbridled anger towards his mother's killers — the foreigners, the Asuras. The man, whom only a few knew, worked as a fisherman, to being a guard to a local Yaksha chief to finally finding his heritage and embracing it when he came to Lanka and met his grandfather. Becoming a man so feared, he had begun to conquer and divide as he moved forward, with the support of his brothers — Vibhishan, Khara and Kumbhkaran.

But most of all, he was a religious man, devoting half of his life to Lord Shiva, building the temples in the name of god and instituting lingas in each part of his city.

Meenakshi respected him for breaking the barriers of what Sumali could achieve and expanding it into something tougher and more respectable.

She saw Vibhishan and he was the shortest of the siblings — with curly hair and a chubby face. He wasn't a warrior but a lawyer, who would contest for those who were imprisoned by Dashanan. He had always hated the methods of Dashanan, probably because he had a different idea of dealing with them. While Dashanan favoured capital punishment, Vibhishan didn't.

'My lord, he's a farmer who fought against the oppressive system of landlordism,' Vibhishan began. 'Sure, his methods aren't justifiable,' he gestured at the poor, bearded man, who stood naked with a thin loin around his waist and his hands were joined together, as he nervously shivered.

'Justifiable?' Dashanan said and the other ministers chuckled, who were standing in a small recess, wearing multi-coloured robes. 'He killed his bloody employer, brother.'

Vibhishan sighed. He had red cheeks. 'I know, my lord, but he deserves life

imprisonment and not …’

‘And if you get a chance, a rapist would be given imprisonment according to you, brother. Please, a life is a life. Good or bad, they are just ideas,’ Dashanan explained. ‘And taking the life of anyone, be it the worst man possible, is wrong. And because he did it, he has to be hung, the swiftest yet a violent form of capital punishment.’

‘But by that default, my lord, you are taking his life too. Isn’t that contradictory?’ Vibhishan argued.

Dashanan smiled. ‘You are a good lawyer and you defend well, but I am not here on trial. I am the executioner.’ He gestured his guards to take the offender away.

Vibhishan wiped his sweat as he glanced at Meenakshi and nervously smiled at her. Meenakshi knew he would be surprised to see her, for she wasn’t always here at the court. Hardly, perhaps, if there were interesting cases. But today was different. Today, Vidhyut would be here. And by the looks of the public who had come in and gathered in the courtroom, she knew why people were excited — they were going to see a Danav. The Pataal race had almost become extinct in Illavarti and the few that saw them would be brought down to their knees in awe.

And it was ironical that Vidhyut lived amongst them and no one knew.

‘The next prisoner is Vidhyut Jihva,’ Vibhishan announced, as she saw the familiar face entering. His patch had been removed and instead of his eye, she saw a large scar across his head. He walked, with his head down and Meenakshi could see wounds and bruises across his face. He probably must have been beaten by the prison guards. ‘His crime — to unlawfully practice trade in the shores of Lanka and concealing his identity, his true nature.’

At that, Meenakshi saw Dashanan, uncomfortably shifting in his cushioned seat. He leaned back and glared at the Danav. ‘Aren’t you short for a Danav?’ asked Dashanan and everyone in the crowd laughed.

Vidhyut looked up. ‘My father was a Danav but my mother was a Manav.’

Meenakshi knew the hybrid off-springs could be born differently and she wished Dashanan would pardon him since he was a hybrid too, the son of a priest and a Rakshas, the most unlikely combination out there.

‘And why did you practice trade unlawfully?’ Asked Dashanan.

‘Because if I did it otherwise, I wouldn’t have been here sooner,’ Vidhyut cheekily responded and he was the only man who didn’t whimper in front of Dashanan.

‘Funny,’ Dashanan said with a straight face. ‘Tell me something Vidhyut. How does it feel to be part of a race which destroyed the entire civilisation of Illavarti?’ He had a raging, deathly gaze at the Danav.

He’s taking it personally.

Meenakshi knew that Dashanan could be an emotional fool to the point of hurting others. Even though he would tell others he was against it, Meenakshi knew her brother well. He was a spiteful man.

Maa died years ago, brother. Don’t take it out on him. It’s not his fault.

‘I don’t know. The race I see back in Pataal, they are quite docile.’

‘Doesn’t matter, my friend,’ Dashanan shook his head. ‘Your kind has been berating us for a while. We were just paid mercenaries, slaves during the Asura Empire. Do you not know how Hiranyakashyap used to play the Rakshas as pawns? Bloody foreigner took us natives and made us bleed for him. Who the horrors does he think he is?’

‘I don’t know. I was not there, my lord.’ Vidhyut responded.

Don’t be cheeky with him.

Khara, Meenakshi’s second oldest brother revolted from the nobles recess, ‘Kill him, my king. He doesn’t deserve to be here.’

Meenakshi wished she could warn Vidhyut, but it was too late. Before Vibhishan could even sort his papers and start his defense, Dashanan stood up: ‘You pay for the crimes you commit.’

‘But my lord!’ Vibhishan came in front. ‘He has not been given the chance of a fair trial.’

‘How does it matter, brother? The man has no shame. I see his anger towards me. He hates me. And he dies in a week.’ Dashanan announced, as people applauded and even gasped, but Meenakshi just clenched her fist. ‘The rule is simple: no foreigners on this land. And those uncouth beasts who dare to come to my empire,’ and his gaze met Vidhyut’s, ‘choose to die. You get the highest form of capital punishment and that is being burnt to death … in public.’

43. Prameela

She wanted to tell him.

But he had gone for the battle. She wanted to tell Dashanan, but he was so busy that he didn't let anyone enter his chambers.

She wanted to tell someone, but she didn't know whether Sita was telling the truth or not. Sita told her that she had received the stone as a gift and that shocked her. If it was true, all of this, whatever was happening … was her fault.

And it was based on an absolute misunderstanding by just one person.

Prameela contemplated in her room, musing thoughtfully as there was a knock on the door and a messenger appeared. 'My lady, Lord Meghnad is here with the prisoner. They are at the court.'

Prameela smiled and nodded.

Washing her face with water from a jar, she cleared her thoughts and was out of the room in no time. She walked through the eastern corridor of the palace and went outside, where the courtyard stood with fountains and crystal statues. She walked out of the palace grounds, with guards behind her as she saw the courthouse which stood opposite to the grounds — a dome-shaped building yet again which was populated with people, trying to look inside.

What was going on?

They had caught Bajrang.

And it was a big thing, for he was the enemy's most important general. As she passed the people, the guards helped her enter by pushing the people aside. Prameela came close to the courthouse which had the public, the nobles and Bajrang in the middle, with his hands tied. He had knelt down. Next to him was Meghnad, standing tall and firm. People whispered about him, about how he was so strong that he defeated the Vanar, Hanuman, who was renowned for fighting Lord Surya, when he was just a child.

There were rumours that he ate the sun, but then, again. Could they be true? No one knew.

Prameela stood close to the front where most women were. The woman with the jet black hair, Mandodari was there too, with Meenakshi on her side. And

Prameela finally laid eyes on her, narrowly gazing at her. By the looks of it, she seemed a very docile and disappointed person.

She didn't look like a shrewd manipulator.

Why did she do it?

Prameela saw Dashanan on his throne, as he began, 'My son, you bring the enemy of the state, the enemy of our empire, General Bajrang on his knees. And for that, you need to be publicly applauded.'

And instantly everyone began clapping. Prameela found a beam of hope and joy in her heart, as she smiled at Meghnad, who searched for her in the crowd and caught her eyes and winked.

'Ape,' Dashanan darted his gaze at the Vanar, whose wounds had been treated and bandaged to keep him alive. He did have a tail but unlike most Vanars, he had a strange wooden layer over his white fur, with his tail gleaming as if it was dipped in something strong. 'Where is your king?'

'Does it matter?' Bajrang asked, tired and exhausted, as he glanced in Meenakshi's direction.

Prameela's eyes looked up at Meenakshi, who began to move from her place and towards the other side of the room.

Why is she walking away?

Vibhishan, as Meghnad had described to Prameela, entered the scene with his notes, as he began: 'My lord, this ape doesn't deserve to be punished here. We don't need to torture him. We need to find the ones who sent him here.'

Meghnad laughed. 'Uncle, that would be unwise. This ape deserves every kind of death and punishment.'

'Why? Because he trespassed our grounds?' Vibhishan protested. 'We have let go of those who have trespassed before, why him? Why is he special?'

Dashanan arched his brows and asked again, 'Bajrang, tell me about your master.'

'My master is King Sugreev and he had sent me here.' Bajrang stood, ropes still binding him, but he didn't flinch. 'He had told me to tell you that stealing someone's wife is going to make you pay a lot.'

'I didn't steal her. I had a valid reason.'

'Well,' he began. 'That reason will be the harbinger of your death.'

'You can't kill me. I rule Illavarti.' Dashanan flared his nostrils. 'No mortal can harm me.'

'Lord Raghav,' he bowed a little as he took the name, 'is no mere human. He's the Avatar of Vishnu and he has sworn your death for abducting Lady Sita.'

Prameela saw Meenakshi going to the corner where the candles lit the palace.

Instead of following the court proceedings, Prameela made her way towards Meenakshi when she saw it …

Meenakshi quickly pushed the candles on the ground, that caught fire to the drapes and it began to spread wildly. And she didn't see Prameela, for she instantly made an escape.

The fire grew like wildfire and it caught on to the Rakshas civilians, even children. Prameela instantly leapt to get hold of the children, and pushed the boys and girls away as it blazed uncontrollably. People in the court were chasing each other, trampling, as Prameela pushed her way around, trying to save as many young lives as she could.

She turned her head to the main room, where Bajrang had kicked Meghnad and with his tail, he put it close to the fire, and began to jump and light the other ends of the court, with his lit tail.

How was he doing it? Of course, the tail was dipped in oil and his woolen clothes were fire retardant.

Prameela shook her head. *This was all planned.*

Prameela instantly made a run for it. But instead of moving away, she was coming close to the centre of the room as the ceiling began to topple, falling around, and crushing a few nobles in the process. Dashanan had escaped with his guards and so did Mandodari and Atikaya.

And she didn't see Bajrang too. With his fire-lit tail, he had vanished. And with few people remaining on the ground, she tried to save the lives of the attendants. Some of the women's lower bodies were crushed, but she managed to push the rubble aside as she tried to bring them up on their feet. The smoke was becoming denser and she kept coughing.

Meghnad?

Prameela's eyes searched for him, as she caught sight of him — he was on the ground under a wooden log of the ceiling. She ordered the guards who had entered to help the civilians, as she made her way to Meghnad.

She came close to the log and lifted it up, burning her fingers in the process, but with determination and dedication, she pushed it aside. Meghnad's chest was burnt and he was not breathing. He was unconscious. Coughing, she grabbed hold of his hand and began dragging him.

Come on! Come on!

Her lungs were giving up as the orange fire blazed in the back and her knees felt weak. She trampled and fell on the ground.

This is it.

She was blurring out.

It's over.

‘PRAMEELA!’ She heard a voice and instantly jerked up.

She looked at the person, who had called her and it was none other than Kumbhkaran.

Why was he here? Wasn’t he at the retreat?

Kumbhkaran was in his tunic, as he grabbed hold of Prameela on her shoulder and uplifted Meghnad on his shoulder too since he was large enough to hold two mortals. Prameela could feel herself carried as she left the doomed mandal, which was now in chaos and fire. She was put down on the floor next to Meghnad.

She could feel fresh air engulfing her chest, as she saw the people coughing around. But Kumbhkaran was unaffected. At last, he showed what he was made of.

He began to smack Meghnad’s chest, pumping air into him.

Prameela worriedly watched Meghnad, hoping he would come alive.

‘He’s close to dying,’ Kumbhkaran swallowed a lump in his throat.

‘Let’s take him to the infirmary,’ Prameela frantically responded, almost shrieking.

‘No,’ he shook his head, ‘they can’t help him. Modern medicine can’t cure his condition.’

Prameela flared her nostrils. ‘What should we do then?’

Kumbhkaran contemplated, before realising in the midst of yells and cries around, ‘I know just the place. But I don’t know if they’ll be happy to see him. They have a potion that can give Meghnad, a good adrenaline rush that will jolt him up, but we have hardly a few minutes to save him, so let’s go.’

‘What is the place and what is this potion?’

Kumbhkaran responded, with a defeated smile, ‘Nikumbila Hills. It’s called the Kali’s Blood. But the last time Meghnad was there, he was kicked out. So let’s hope, they would help us.’

44. Suparnika

A few years earlier …

I must not get caught.

This was the fourth time that she had entered the prison.

Passing through the cells in her dark cloak, Meenakshi walked calmly to see the end cell — the cell of the very man, who was about to die in three days. Vidhyut Jihva had his hands crossed behind and when he heard the steps, he turned around.

Meenakshi smiled at Vidhyut and through the railings, they held each other's hands. She didn't feel like leaving him. It had been just few days of knowing him, but it felt like a lifetime.

Vidhyut was a calm, composed and warm human being. Be it Danav or Asura or bloody Manav, it didn't matter. He was a good man who was about to die. And he didn't deserve it … one bit.

He accepted her with her shortcomings, she accepted him with his. They both were scarred in one way or the other. His parents had died from a virus that had been attacking Pataal and that's why most of the Asuras and Danavs were travelling here to Illavarti, to seek asylum. He loved his sea and his fishes, while she loved books and writing.

She would give him poems for the night and he would read them. He would write in broken forms in response and she would laugh. He was not an educated man, but he was pure at heart and noble.

Meenakshi had paid the guards to disperse while she would stay there, outside of the prison, holding the hands of the very man she liked after many years. 'Have you planned something?'

Vidhyut shook his head. 'You asked me to get the names of the people who would help me, but none come to mind. I came here alone and perhaps I would go alone.'

'Don't talk nonsense. I'll make sure you are safe,' Meenakshi arched her brows. He had become really pessimistic in the last few days.

'Because I can see the end,' he stated calmly.

‘I see the end. And I see you would be safe.’ Meenakshi clenched her jaw.

‘With whom?’ Vidhyut asked. ‘If I escape, I’ll be alone. At least, in my last days, you are here to comfort me.’

‘You have known me for just four days, my dear.’

‘In four days, you provided me a lifetime of happiness. I have never met a woman like you,’ Vidhyut smiled. ‘Please, forgive my hastiness, but I don’t want to die alone. Would you marry me, princess?’

Meenakshi chuckled. ‘Don’t joke.’

He clutched her palms tighter. ‘I don’t lie. I am serious. If I don’t escape, then it’s …’

Meenakshi put his finger on his lips. ‘You will. I have a way, the only way, actually,’ she sighed.

‘And if we get out, will you come with me?’

Meenakshi contemplated. ‘I don’t know … I mean …’

‘I don’t want to go then,’ he said, nodding to himself. ‘If you don’t promise to be with me, I don’t think I will have a place in this world.’

‘All right, all right, mister,’ she smiled. ‘I’ll come.’

He brought her palm close to his lips and kissed it. Meenakshi showed him the key. ‘I got this today. I managed to bribe the jailor directly.’

His eyes shone with shock and delight as Meenakshi unlocked the door. And the moment, she did, he kissed her harshly and tightly, as if it was the last and the first thing he had done for a long time. They were wrapped in each other’s arms for a while, before Vidhyut cocked back her head and said, ‘Can’t we escape now?’

‘The jailor is not an idiot. He has many men stationed outside. He has just allowed it so that I could be with you in the premises.’ Meenakshi nodded, as the security had heightened. She had to find the day, when it wasn’t.

‘What is the plan then? You said, there’s one and only one way?’

Meenakshi’s face dropped. And she didn’t know if it would work or not. ‘He has to agree to help. But if he doesn’t, I don’t know what else we can do.’

‘Who is this “he”?’

‘The son of the very man who detained you. The prince of Lanka.’ She looked up, gazing deep in his searing golden eye. ‘Meghnad.’

Vidhyut thought for a moment, but kissed her again, on the lips, even to the point of biting it and she liked the after image, the sensation on her lips that she was left with. He pushed her against the wall and placed his lips close to her neck. ‘Then tonight, my dear,’ he looked at her, romantically, his fingers tracing her hair. ‘I’ll be yours and you’ll be mine.’

45. Prameela

They had reached.

They were inside the hills where the Goddess Kali temple stood, and as Meghnad was being carried on the horse carriage, Prameela asked Kumbhkaran, ‘You never leave your retreat for any reason?’

‘I don’t,’ he said, nodding.

‘Then why did you?’

Kumbhkaran clenched his jaw. ‘My wife told me there was a fire and I thought of going, but then I stopped until the guards informed her everyone was out except Meghnad. I had to go and help him, to see whether he was inside or not.’

‘You left your retreat for him?’ she gasped. Kumbhkaran seemed like a disciplined man, and she had a hard time accepting it.

‘He’s the only kid I have,’ Kumbhkaran sighed. ‘My son left me and my wife alone, long back. We were childless, to be honest. But then this wide-eyed kid came one day to my basement and said I want to learn what you do. I mean, imagine, he was not even ten. And he had these bright eyes that I couldn’t say no to. And every day, I would teach him and as the years passed, he became my son. My only son.’

Prameela sadly smiled, as she turned back to Meghnad, who was unconscious with the red burning mark on his chest. ‘He will live.’

‘He will if he gets that serum,’ he said. ‘And you need to really beg for it.’

Prameela stepped out of the carriage once they were close to the gates and went to the door where the guards with white tunics stood. They didn’t stop her for she didn’t have weapons on her.

She came inside to see the large statue and she demanded, ‘I seek Guru Pracheta.’ She looked at the priests, who walked around, paying her no heed, but one of them rushed inside the rooms and brought an old, wrinkled man who had a hood over his head.

‘Yes?’ The man said.

‘My … my …’ she was shivering.

‘Calm down, dear. What happened?’

‘My husband is wounded and he’s close to death,’ Prameela said. ‘I need you to give him the serum, Kali’s Blood.’

He was instantly taken aback. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘Because my husband is Indrajit, Lord Meghnad, the prince of Lanka.’

Pracheta’s face turned white. ‘Of course, the infidel seeks our help now, but he cast us aside when we offered to help him.’

She joined her palms. ‘Guruji, I beg of you. He’s close to dying and we don’t have much time. Please help me.’

Pracheta looked at her with disappointment and pity, as he nodded. Sighing, he said, ‘He can’t have it.’

Tears were brimming in her eyes, as she shrieked, ‘Why?’ And all the priests looked at the distraught woman, who had just come from nowhere.

Pracheta held her by the shoulders, as he tried to pacify her. ‘My dear, because he’s incapable of providing a yagna to Goddess Kali. We can only give the serum to the one who worships our goddess.’

Prameela nodded. ‘Then I shall do it.’

‘What?’

‘I shall pray to her, on his behalf. If he’s incapable, I will do it on his behalf,’ she said, determinedly.

‘But you don’t need the serum, my dear.’

‘He’s my husband,’ she said. ‘We are one, aren’t we? His pain is mine to bear. My weakness, his weakness. My strength … is his strength. I beg of you, let me do the yagna and he shall be free and I promise you, when he wakes up, he shall give his prayers to Goddess Kali herself, but he needs our help immediately.’

Pracheta looked back as Prameela swivelled her head to see Kumbhkaran had taken the unconscious body of Meghnad out and placed him on the ground. Then Pracheta looked at her, who was in tears. ‘All right. You may do the needful.’

Prameela touched the priest’s feet and instantly walked up to the statue, falling on her feet and began chanting the words of prayer. There was a small fire being kindled in front of it, with coals. Once she had prayed for Meghnad, the safety of their future and his protection, she stood up and pulled off all her necklaces and rings and just threw them away in the fire which burst out, crackling, spitting out embers. She didn’t care about the gold at all.

‘Here,’ a voice came from behind.

Prameela turned to see Pracheta who had a tube in his hand, which was of red colour and looked almost like blood. She hugged the priest who just chuckled in return and then she rushed outside, looking at Kumbhkaran. ‘How’s he now?’

‘He is breathing. But it’s still faint,’ Kumbhkaran responded.

Prameela knelt next to Meghnad and lifted his head up. Using the liquid from the tube, she began to slip some of it into his mouth. He was not swallowing and so she tilted his head back, for the liquid to go inside him. She made him drink more and slowly his lips began to crackle and move.

He's alive.

And instantly there was a jolt of excitement, as his eyes opened and the colour of his skin returned. A zap of energy filled his actions as if the wound on his chest, didn't affect him at all. 'Haaaaaa!' He exclaimed and then looked at her and Kumbhkaran. 'Wait, what just happened?'

Kumbhkaran laughed and so did Prameela. 'Kid, this girl just saved your life.'

46. Suparnika

A few years earlier …

‘I already knew of it, Aunty,’ Meghnad revealed.

Meenakshi was stunned, looking at her nephew, who was sitting on his chair, casually with spiky hair as he looked at her intently. ‘You did?’

‘Of course. I got it out of the jailor. I have good relations with these folks,’ he smiled. ‘And don’t worry, I didn’t tell Father.’

Meenakshi grinned. ‘Ah, that’s a relief.’ She paused. ‘But wait, why didn’t you?’ she blinked hard, trying to study his face, but she could see Meghnad was not lying. ‘You are his favourite and you always respected him. But you didn’t tell him this because …’ she trailed off, hoping he would complete her sentence, but he remained quiet.

‘Honestly speaking, Aunty, I have been contemplating. But you told me beforehand, so I plan not to tell him now, since well … I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right to do that to you.’ He softly pulled up his lips. ‘Do you love him?’

Meenakshi nodded.

‘That’s kind of problematic, Aunty. Don’t you think? He’s going to die tomorrow.’ He shook his head.

‘That’s why I need you, dear,’ Meenakshi came forward, sitting close to him, with pleading eyes. ‘You can help me. You are the only person, who is close to me, who I can trust.’

He paused, almost taken aback. ‘To do what?’

Meenakshi thought for a moment before answering. ‘To help him escape.’

Instantly, he stood up from his chair and walked aimlessly around the room as he quietly judged Meenakshi, with his stern, curt eyes. ‘You know that is against Father’s wishes.’

She was expecting this from him — to be afraid of Dashanan for Meghnad always did what his father taught him to do. ‘But you know, it’s wrong.’

‘What father says, it’s right. And everything else is wrong.’

‘Your father is not a saint.’ Meenakshi gritted her teeth, as she stood up. ‘There was a woman, Meghnad. Before you were born. Your father … erm …

well … he saw her one day and he couldn’t control his lust and he well … he forced himself on her to the point that she had to give in. He did it all even though he was married to your mother. And he didn’t care when the woman’s husband came. They had a fight and Meghnad, he killed both of them, with his bare hands, so no one would know.’

Meghnad studied her, blinking, with horror.

‘He told me this,’ she said, and she was telling the truth and she could see how Meghnad’s expression was changing from someone who believed in his father to someone who was now skeptical. ‘When he was in grief and he was weak and vulnerable. I was the only one he revealed it to and he still regrets it, but that doesn’t erase the fact that he did it.’

Meenakshi walked to her nephew and hugged him from behind. ‘My dear, your father is the frailest and the weakest I’ve ever met. He’s so flawed, that if his secrets spill out in the empire, it can topple his rule. He works on impulse, and thus he surrounds himself with rules, so he can be disciplined. Please, I request you to not let your love for him blind you to do the right thing. Freeing Vidhyut is the right thing to do.’

Meghnad stayed silent and Meenakshi couldn’t see him, for her head was on his shoulder. And then the answer came:

‘All right, Aunty. I shall do as you ask.’

47. Meghnad

The war had begun.

It hadn’t even been a week since the aftermath of the fire when Raghav’s army with Sugreev had reached the shores with their ships and boats, ready to attack. They had broken the first line of naval attacks and were on the shore, close to Ashoka Vatika, establishing their tents around, netting their borders with men and onlookers and creating an entire rebel party that would spark the beginning of the war.

Meghnad was in his purplish-coloured tent, many yards away from Raghav’s and was looking in the shard of a glass — his own reflection. His wound was more or less healed and due to the Kali’s Blood which had accelerated his healing, it also made him tough and energised to the point he was having a hard time slowing his heartbeat.

The lamp was lit in the corner of his tent where the breastplate of his empire rested on the table next to it. Before he could pick it up and wear it, he saw Prameela in the beautiful rich, linen red gown entering his chamber.

‘I thought you wouldn’t come,’ Meghnad said.

‘Surprised you, didn’t I?’ She came close as Meghnad wrapped his arm around her waist. ‘Good luck on your first day.’

Meghnad nodded. ‘I’m nervous,’ he confessed.

‘I know.’ She rubbed her brows, as if she had something on it. ‘I know what you are feeling nowadays, for some reason. I just get to know when you lie and when you don’t.’

‘I don’t lie,’ he smirked.

Prameela chuckled, as she pulled back and got the breastplate, which she made him wear across his chest and strapped it on his shoulders and around his waist. Then she brought the helmet and placed it on his head, after which she hugged him from behind as they both looked at each other’s reflections. ‘Will we marry after this?’

‘I promise,’ he smiled.

‘What’s your plan for today?’ she said as she moved towards her rucksack,

pulling out the sari that he had wanted. ‘You made me bring Sita’s sari and her locket. Why? I had to tell her that it needs washing after I spilled some food that we shared during our midday lunch. I gave her a spare meanwhile.’

Meghnad didn’t answer, as he took them with him like weapons. ‘You have made Sita trust you. That’s good.’

‘Sita is a good person, my love,’ she said. ‘How do you plan to deal with Meenakshi?’

It was only yesterday, Prameela had revealed it to Meghnad and it had shocked him to the core.

But he didn’t believe Prameela, because they were based on the words of Sita and her alone. ‘I’m still thinking.’

‘You like her too much to believe she has manipulated this whole scenario,’ Prameela said. ‘She’s the reason, you almost died.’

‘It could be a trick of the eye. She can’t let innocent civilians of her race just burn into ashes,’ Meghnad responded.

‘I saw her do it,’ Prameela retorted. ‘You don’t believe me?’

And he didn’t. It was too hard for him to do so.

‘This war is futile because the reason behind it is not noble. I plead you to take this up with your father, so he learns that all of this is … fake.’

Meghnad clenched his jaw. ‘I want to hear it from Aunty. I’ll meet her after today.’

‘ *We* will meet her.’

Meghnad contemplated and then nodded his head, for he had no choice. He wanted to meet his aunt sooner, but Dashanan ordered him to go to the outskirts with his army and start preparing for the defensive line of battle, since the enemy was in the homeland.

With a deep sigh, he walked out.

*

Meghnad sat on his stallion. On one side of him was Atikaya and on the other, it was Kumbhkaran who came out of his retreat to finally be in the battle, since he broke his oath of not returning already, for Meghnad. They looked at the battlefield up ahead. They had to burn and cut the trees to gain a wider perspective and vision over the opposing army. Behind him, Meghnad could see the archers lined up, the catapults being prepared and battle rams being steadied while the elephants trumpeted and the caged lions which were saved for later roared, if out of extremity for the unpredictability of these animals. The banners were strung high, flags were hoisted and the air was damp. The feeling was

deathly.

The mist flowed across the field, as Meghnad stared at Raghav — a tall, fair fellow with his brother Laxman, by his side. He had known about them, studied them before entering the battle and it was important. They both had matted hair, but Laxman was more hotheaded. It seemed like Raghav was composed, on his brown stallion, with steady hands. Sugreev's army stood behind him, Vanars of all shapes and sizes, colours and armours. Bajrang was on Laxman's side, and Meghnad winked at him, before he began acting out his plan.

They were yards away but Meghnad asked his messenger to carry the locket and the sari and take it to Raghav. He had some pig's blood over it, drenched in it, as the messenger sprinted to the other side of the field.

'Do you think it'll work?' Atikaya asked.

'It's suicide, kid,' Kumbhkaran said. 'You are just angering the enemy.'

Meghnad smiled. 'In anger, one does stupid things. He needs to feel defeated before even the war has started.'

'Smart,' Atikaya grinned.

Raghav received the sari and he looked at it. For a moment, Bajrang, Laxman and Raghav discussed amongst each other and then Meghnad saw it — the anger, the frustration as the Avatar of Vishnu clutched the sari in his hand and looked up in hot, bloody rage.

He began ordering Laxman to do something, yelling, in fact, but Laxman and Bajrang calmed him down.

'He has smart men around him,' Meghnad said. 'They won't attack today.' He looked at Kumbhkaran. 'We won't as well. No use wasting resources. We have just showed them that their purpose has died. Sita has died. He might even pull out.' He looked back at the army, who watched him with awe and respect and they were thousands. 'We give them a day. If tomorrow, they are not moving, we attack.' And he swivelled his head one last time to look at Raghav, facing a certain crisis —

What if all of this was just fake? What if the purpose behind it was false? What if Akshaya's death was just out of … pure misunderstanding?

Can Sita's words be actually true?

The horror of that question settled in his nerves, as he asked himself:

If that was honest, doesn't it change everything?

And then he heard the horns blowing. His eyes stressed on Raghav and Laxman who had now begun to ride forward.

The war had begun.

48. Laxman

The two armies clashed against each other.

Everything was in chaos as Laxman could feel his horse trample and fall on the ground, dust enveloping his face. He grabbed hold of his sword, as he stood up, trying to search for Raghav but he was nowhere to be seen. Laxman didn't have a helmet and he wished he had one. He had a quiver and a bow, hanging at the back for long range attacks, but now everything was here, in front of him.

As the Rakshasas came forward, Laxman sliced through them, attacking and stabbing them through the torsos and heads, piercing their eyes and slitting their throats. Blood washed over his face and his battle armour, as dust began to corrosively cover his chest.

He coughed, as he came forward. The horses had lined up around him, as he pulled out his bow and arrow and shot the horsemen down, again and again.

The arrows hit the horses as well.

And that was when he could feel a stab in his back.

And another!

Laxman turned, pulling out the arrows to see where it was coming from — and it was a Pisach.

He instantly sprinted towards the creature and lurched on it, jumping on top and stabbing its face multiple times until the flesh crumbled and its skull was smashed.

Bloody Tribals. They don't deserve to be here. All of them.

They killed Sita Maa and Laxman had almost burst in tears with his brother, if it wasn't for the war to begin, he would have wept more. They had tried so much. They had conquered to do nothing but save her from the clutches of these monstrous Rakshasas and their hope was lost.

Raghav wanted to go in the battlefield. Sugreev wimped out, as always, saying there was no point in doing it. But Bajrang attested that revenge must be taken and he was an exception since he was not a full Tribal but the son of a Manav and a Vanar. And Laxman chose to run at the evil Meghnad.

Sugreev was a disappointment but then he was a Tribal.

I can't expect much from him.

And he was not wrong. Ever since the beginning, the Tribals have not shown one bit of redemption in them. They were creatures of darkness, they were wild and beastly and selfish.

He touched his back and he could feel the blood on his palms and a sudden wave of pain washed over his pale face.

He looked around and the enormity of death and destruction surrounded him. Men of both sides were killing and slicing each other horrendously with no qualm for hope and loss.

Just madness. Pure, dark madness.

And he knew why. Manavs could fight in this one. Because it was a beastly affair. From far, he could see the lord of these beasts and that was Meghnad. He was on the other side of the war, but he was in a chariot rather than a stallion and his chariot had blades attached to its wheels, from which he was slicing through the Vanar army, killing them with such ease and patience. Laxman saw his face — the moustached prince of Lanka, with wavy shoulder-length hair; a slim, muscular man and determined as if he was born to do this. He was popular for being a sorcerer, but what he did now, was not magic but purely violent innovation. The blades were razor sharp and were cutting through the skin, tearing body parts and as the wheels rotated, so did the blades, leading to quicker deaths and mangled bodies.

Still in his thoughts, he heard something — a yell!

He turned around to see a big Rakshas sprinting towards him with a mace, taking Laxman by surprise.

Laxman instantly turned around, dodging the attack. The Rakshas was taken aback by his quickness and then grunted and bellowed, as he struck the mace close to Laxman who tried to hastily defend himself with his bow, and his bow … broke!

Laxman pulled out his sword, but it got stuck in its sheath. And as he tried to pull it out, the mace sliced through the air thunderously towards his face …

Then it stopped!

Laxman, wide eyed, saw when it stopped and he thought it would be Raghav, when his eyes fell on the brown-furred Vanar with a shield, cowering over Laxman. And the Vanar was clearly identifiable.

It was Sugreev.

Laxman now had the time to pull the sword out and stab it in the Rakshas's chest. The Rakshas collapsed, in the midst of the hundred corpses that lay in the ground.

Sugreev turned, still hunched, but with a grin.

Laxman smiled back.

And that was when more Rakshasas appeared with their swords and maces and blades circling around Laxman and Sugreev, who now had their backs against each other.

‘Ready?’ Sugreev asked.

Laxman could feel the searing shots of pain running and coursing through his body, but he nodded: ‘Yeah, I am ready.’

49. Suparnika

A few years earlier …

Meenakshi waited at the cornfields for Vidhyut.

They were supposed to be there at sundown and as she hid in the deceptive field of grass that grew around her in enormity, a sudden realisation began to dawn on her.

Will he be even coming? Was Meghnad successful in getting him? Did he get caught?

Brandishing thoughts of darkness began to wash over her face, as she swallowed a nervous lump in her throat and tried to get hold of her bag that she had carried to the field there.

I must meet Meghnad.

She began to walk towards the city, hoping … hoping nothing had gone wrong.

*

Meenakshi reached the centre of the city and she realised there was a large crowd that had gathered outside the royal palace where a huge pedestal stood. With her hood on to conceal her identity, she began to move past the people to see why they all were standing and when she came close, to the front, she saw on the pedestal —

Meghnad.

With Vidhyut, who was tied up with a rope by him, while Dashanan and Khara were on his side.

Meenakshi's heart sunk.

No.

Meghnad didn't share a glance with Meenakshi, but she saw him and he was waving at the people, as he was proud of it, proud of catching him.

Dashanan in all his ugly glory proclaimed, 'The prisoner tried to escape, but my dear son, Meghnad, the great prince, managed to apprehend him. He tried to attack our guards and Meghnad too, which speaks volumes for what kind of man

we are killing today. Vidhyut Jihva, the illegal trader, the foreigner shall not be met with death so easily. His fate has been written where his death was in my hands.'

'This is to announce that we do not tolerate foreigners in this new world,' Khara added, with his bald head, gleaming under the bright light and his tight-fitted clothes that were wrapped around his small body.

Vidhyut swallowed a lump, as the guards began to pour oil over him. Meenakshi looked at him, her eyes tearing up, as she tried her best to not cry. She clamped her mouth shut, trying not to shriek in public and let everyone know.

Why Meghnad? Why?

And then, Dashanan came forward with a torch in his hand. But instead of putting her love on fire, he gave it to his son.

Meghnad was shocked and so was the public. He looked at the torch, hesitating before he took it. And then calmly and slowly, he put it close to Vidhyut. The wave of blue and orange fire raged across his body as he began to burn, but he couldn't move since he was tied up.

He tried to push himself away and he tried to roll over, and the people gasped in horror as his body began to grow dark and deathly … almost like ash.

And Meenakshi's hands swept across her stomach.

He will never be able to see her child.

Our child.

50. Meghnad

Today was over.

And they had won.

Meghnad had lost a lot of people and he had decided that for the next time, he would use the Astras to create menace, create a major explosion, leading to the downfall of Sugreev's army. He had been able to hurt many for now with his enhanced chariot that he conceived in the last moment, when he added two swords and tied them to the middle of the wheel, so when it moved, it would create a rotating death trap.

And as much as he anticipated the next war — he had to meet Aunt Meenakshi and confront her.

She had a tent here in the battlefield, and as he walked towards it with Prameela, holding hands, he scanned his surroundings — it was night time, and logs were being burnt to keep people warm, pigs were being roasted to consume, men cleaned their weapons while women were helping them with their wounds. There were water jugs being carried around and hundreds of tents were lined up till the end, the last being Dashanan's — the biggest where the war plans were made.

'Are you okay?' Prameela rubbed his arm.

'I'm nervous.'

'I can see that.'

Meghnad smiled to himself, as they reached the red tent and stood outside it. 'Do you want to come?'

Prameela nodded.

As they entered without permission, they saw a simple looking place with books and paintings, scripts of poetry next to the quill and ink box. Meenakshi was scribbling over it and when she realised someone was inside, she turned to see them and arched her brows: 'Yes?' She glumly asked, as she resumed her work.

Meghnad tried to begin the conversation but his tongue didn't allow. His mouth wouldn't open and he nervously looked at Prameela, who clutched on to

his fingers and said: ‘Lady Meenakshi, we need to know.’

‘And what would that be, Lady Prameela?’ Meenakshi asked calmly.

‘Lady Sita said that apparently you gave her the ruby stone,’ Prameela said.

She stopped scribbling on the paper and Meghnad saw she was fidgeting. ‘What kind of dreadful insinuation is that?’

‘We came to you first before going to Lord Dashanan because we want to know if you will confess to this crime.’

‘You have a sharp tongue, girl. I have served this empire before you were even born.’ Meenakshi turned, coming on her feet, with the conical quill on her fingers. ‘And you think I did it.’ She turned to Meghnad. ‘Do you believe her accusations?’

Meghnad was conflicted between the woman he loved and the woman who raised him, once upon a time. ‘Did you, Aunty? Is it true?’

‘Oh, great,’ she sighed. ‘Of course, you would listen to anyone but me. Like the last time.’ She shrugged.

Meghnad clenched his jaw. ‘I listened to you the last time.’ And Prameela was sharing a confused look between the two.

‘Then why did Vidhyut burn to death publicly?’ she said. ‘With you torching him … eh?’

Prameela incredulously widened her eyes, and Meghnad could see she was uncomfortable instantly, when she let go of his palm and pushed herself back a little.

Meenakshi smiled, looking at Prameela. ‘You didn’t tell her, did you? Well, my dear, he promised to help my husband and then ended up burning him in public. If you think you stand close to a good man, you are wrong. He’s worse than his father.’

Meghnad watched Prameela, who was still puzzled. ‘It didn’t happen like that. I never could explain the truth to you, Aunty, because … because I believed it’ll hurt you so much that I thought I would rather be the villain here in your story than to make someone else the devil.’

‘I *saw* the truth.’ She gritted her teeth, as tears brimmed from her eyes. ‘It was right there in front of me.’

‘But you didn’t see what happened prior to that day,’ Meghnad sighed, quietly saying it in a whisper, as his heart began to jolt.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Vidhyut never loved you, Aunty,’ Meghnad announced. ‘In fact, he tried to kill me.’

51. Suparnika

A few years earlier …

This was it.

She had to do it.

She had the dagger in her hand as she walked inside his room. He was sitting there, going through his papers and he looked up, his gray eyes watching her calmly.

‘What is it?’ Dashanan asked.

Meenakshi was emotional and she was hurting. She had the dagger close to her heart, as her hands nervously fidgeted. Her eyes were teary and red. Dashanan’s eyes fell on her blade and he leaned forward. ‘What a shame.’ He shook his head. ‘I expected more from you, my dear.’

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ Meenakshi chided. ‘You could have spared him.’

‘You fall for the man who tried to kill your nephew. What a pity.’

‘You lie, like you always do,’ she spat. ‘You are a miserable, old man, do you know that?’ She frowned, as she recalled the secret Sumali had told her about Dashanan few months back.

‘I see it. I see it. He will die by the Avatar of Vishnu. Only by his hands.’

Meenakshi flared her nostrils and then she instantly leapt at Dashanan, flinging her blade across his face, creating a scar on his cheek, but she missed, as he leaned back on his chair. Her stomach hit the edge of the table and instantly rocked her with pain. She held on to it, trying to protect her stomach.

Dashanan noticed that, disgust spreading over his face. ‘Don’t tell me you bear his child too.’ Dashanan shook his head. ‘You tried to kill me for that man. You are a disgrace to this empire.’

Meenakshi didn’t listen. She jumped on the table and crossed it to attack Dashanan, but he grabbed hold of her arm and twisted it. She yelled in agony, as he pushed her back and hit her stomach on the ledge, with his teeth and mouth coming close to her ears: ‘My dear, I won’t allow that child of a Danav to live here … and I’ll make sure he gets killed before he even takes birth.’

And then by grabbing her throat, he dragged her to the window and kissed her on the forehead. It was only the first floor and Meenakshi could see her end.

Might as well die than live with this monster.

'If only that poor naive Meghnad could have seen who you are, know your violent truth, you freak,' Meenakshi spat on the face of the king of Lanka, and he wiped it with a grin.

'He won't,' he shook his head. 'Because you see, I hide it well.'

And then he pushed her and she saw the blurriness around her, with a thud putting an end to her turmoil.

52. Suparnika

And she had lost a child since then. At least, she knew that was his intention.

The fall had hurt her, broken her ankles but had also broken her spirit for months when she had to take care of herself. She had to show to Dashanan that she was still his dutiful sister. She apologised and begged for his forgiveness to which he gave in, while she internally plotted his downfall.

If I couldn't have done it, I would find the Avatar of Vishnu to do it.

And now his son tells the same lies, which he did many years ago. She looked at Meghnad and she could sense that he wasn't lying. After manipulating so many people, for so long, she knew when someone was lying and someone wasn't.

'What do you mean?' she asked Meghnad, who stood with his aghast wife.

'I did what you told me to do,' he was teary eyed. 'Aunty, I went there. I promise I did. I got him out and the first thing he does is, he grabs hold of me and tells me that he will kill me and then he will kill my father and then … he will hurt you.'

'That doesn't sound like Vidhyut at all.'

'The man was sent there to kill Dashanan. He hated him. And he hated all Rakshasas. I told him, he could have lived peacefully with you but he didn't care. He said his brothers were persecuted and killed by Dashanan during his conquests and he quietly came here to Lanka to plot and murder him. He spread the rumours that he was a Danav and then once he got caught, he engaged in a relationship with you,' Meghnad explained. 'You weren't a part of his plan, but he improvised seeing you were falling head-over-heels for him. Once he got the opportunity to escape, he tried to kill me. I defended and apprehended him.' He shook his head. 'I told my father after that because I was afraid. He still accepted me and told me that Vidhyut should pay for his crimes.'

Meenakshi carefully listened to this, as her heartbeat began to rise and fall. If this was true, all her plans, all her actions were motivated by a man who used her.

There was no love.

She felt … *betrayed.*

But then this was Meghnad and he could be spinning lies, for all she knew. ‘You are lying. I don’t trust you.’

‘I don’t want you to trust me, Aunty,’ Meghnad sighed. ‘But if you really led this war just for spite and to take revenge on Father, we can’t let this go forward. There’s a human life at stake and that is Lady Sita. She didn’t deserve this.’

Meenakshi wanted to speak, but she was overcome with guilt. *Why was I feeling guilty? He could be lying.*

‘Did you do it? Did you give Sita the ruby?’ Meghnad asked.

Meenakshi nodded, as images of Dashanan throwing her off the first storey came back to her — visions of Vidhyut’s burning and her hatred for Rakshasas began to wash over her face. ‘I gave it to her because no matter what you say, dear, Dashanan deserves to die and …’ She instantly pounced at Meghnad with the quill, ‘SO DO YOU!’

Meghnad grabbed her arm and pushed her against the wall, but she managed to stab him on the palm and he yelled in pain. Meenakshi then pulled his sword, from the sheath while he tried to stop his bleeding. She brought the blade across Meghnad’s chest when …

She felt it.

It was a searing pain that came from her side and as her head turned, she saw a dagger had been pushed deep into her waist, as the blood began to blot over her gown. She looked up to see where it came from and it was none other than Prameela.

She could feel her energy drain and her face go white, as she fell on the floor.

Meghnad came close to her and even though she had attacked him, he held on to her. ‘Aunty … you’ll be fine. PRAMEELA! Call the nurses.’ But Prameela was frozen after stabbing Meenakshi.

‘No,’ Meenakshi smiled, as her long nails traced the perfect features of her nephew. ‘You are a good man with a bad father. I hope you realise that.’ And she leaned forward, as life ebbed out of her body, when she said: ‘No matter what, I always have the last laugh. Tell that to your father.’ She could see Meghnad was confused, when her vision began to blur and the last thing she heard was the …

War horn!

53. Meghnad

The horns were ringing loudly.

Another battle.

Meghnad was confused, as he held the dead Meenakshi in his arms. He hugged her one last time and then went for Prameela, who was shivering and crying.

‘I’m … I’m … I’m sorry,’ she whimpered. ‘I didn’t know what to do. She would have killed you.’

‘It’s okay,’ Meghnad hugged her tightly. ‘I understand.’ And then he looked at the woman who was responsible for this pointless war.

He was feeling his energy drain out of him as if the Kali’s Blood was washing away and the wounds on his body began to hurt more than they would have earlier. But he dismissed all those thoughts when he said, ‘Inform my father about Aunt Meenakshi. Tell him what she has done to incite this war. We need to stop this.’

Prameela nodded. ‘We have to. Sita doesn’t deserve this. Sh-she doesn’t. You know that, right?’

Meghnad didn’t know what to believe and what not to anymore. ‘And get the medical team here, to take the corpse away.’ He instructed her, dismissing her question.

‘Will you do it?’

‘No, you listen,’ she said, shaking. ‘You have to promise me. You will do everything to save her. This is no more about the war. This is about a woman. Promise me you will save her.’ She looked at him with deep set eyes. ‘You have been fighting for your father for so long. And look what has happened.’ She gestured at the corpse of Meenakshi. ‘Start fighting for what’s *right.’*

Prameela nodded again. Meghnad didn’t know how much she understood. He came out of the tent, rushing towards the frontiers, which was closest to the battlefield where he saw Kumbhkaran and Atikaya amongst a hundred Rakshasas, who were watching the incoming Vanar army march towards them.

‘What is going on?’ Meghnad said.

Kumbhkaran was confused. ‘We need to attack, kid. Sit on your bloody Vimana and use the Astra. It’s ready now and I’ve put it in the back of your Vimana. Just go. We have a great opportunity of finally ending this.’

Meghnad was confused and shocked, as Atikaya dragged him to the Vimana. Most of the times, he would be happy sitting on the flying machine, but today seeing his men go into battle and fighting this war — he felt stupid. He felt as if everything that had happened till then was for no reason.

He sat on the Vimana, as Atikaya began to fly it, lifting it up and suspending them in the air.

The chopper began to move, as he directed and glided the vehicle towards the army. Meghnad peeked from the corner, to see below, where all of this was happening — all of them looked like ants from up in the sky.

‘I’m going towards their camp. We need to hit them straight in the heart,’ Atikaya said, as they flew ahead.

The wind was chirpy and strong, pulsating through his face and bringing a stark coldness to his nerves.

I have lost my purpose.

‘MEGHNAD!’ He heard Atikaya bringing him back to reality. ‘Release the bomb!’

Meghnad blinked, as he nervously fidgeted through the explosive Astras and picking one of them up — a compressed cylinder with the minerals of Chintamani and Soma. It was the same one which he used to destroy Amravati.

He looked down, and they were near the camp, just above it. One throw of this bomb, and the entire decimation of the camp was guaranteed.

‘Why?’ He asked Atikaya.

‘What do you mean why? For the same reason, you destroyed Amravati, for Akshaya, for the Rakshas Empire?’

Meghnad clutched the cylinder, against his chest. ‘I can’t do it. It’s wrong. This war is wrong.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Atikaya scoffed. ‘Throw the damn bomb!’

Meghnad shook his head. ‘Take us back.’

Atikaya didn’t listen. Instead, he left the wheels and tried to grab the cylinder from Meghnad’s hand. They had a tussle when the Vimana began to dwindle and move away from the camp and towards the hills, as there was no one to guide it.

‘We are going to crash!’ Meghnad yelled at his brother, but Atikaya threw the bomb, after finally getting hold of it.

Meghnad saw it happening and instead of thinking twice, he just leapt from the Vimana, high up in the air, as his hair began to flutter against the waves of the wind. He grabbed hold off the Vaishnavastra in mid-air, as he turned back to

look up seeing that the Vimana was now in Atikaya's control and was moving away.

But when he turned again in the air, he saw he was about to hit the ground and he only hoped the power and surge of Kali's Blood would give him the durability to not die.

But if he did die, he wouldn't regret his decision.

He wrapped the bomb with his coat, so it doesn't hit the ground, he had turned so his back would hit the ground first and he hoped …

To not die.

54. Laxman

The second battle was not announced by them.

And the spontaneity of it was the reason why it was so successful. Also because, Meghnad, surprisingly and confusingly wasn't a part of the war.

Laxman rested in front of the fire after the sun had come up, with the rays of the orange sun grinning at him. Raghav, with battle-adorned scars sat alongside his new friends Bajrang and Sugreev, right next to Laxman. They had a map and they were planning their next strategy.

'How long will this go on for?' Laxman asked in a defeated tone. He was brutally injured and was drinking medical herb liquids which gave him intermittent surges of energies.

'We can't go on for long,' Sugreev said. 'My men are injured and dying. I've called for more, but if they'll be fighting continuously, we won't have a chance to escape from here and win.'

Raghav bit his lips and Laxman could see he was contemplating. 'What if we … well … find a way to kill Meghnad? He is a big obstruction in our plan. We returned victorious from the last one because he was not here.'

Laxman stood up, pursing his lips. 'Brother, don't mind me, but Sita Maa is dead and I really don't see the point of carrying this forward so we can take our revenge. Why don't we abandon this war?'

'I shall kill Raavan for what he did to me,' Raghav stood, clenching his jaw. 'If you don't want to be a part of it, so be it. And also, I don't think she died. She couldn't have. Until I see her body, I won't believe it.'

Laxman sighed. He was exhausted and he knew fighting and arguing with his brother would be a fool's errand.

'I could be of some help,' they heard a voice.

Everyone's heads turned and from the bushes came out a pot-bellied, hooded man. That particular area was in the corner and was unguarded, close to where Laxman and his comrades were sitting down.

'Who are you?' Laxman asked, and the man removed his hood, revealing a cherub-faced, red-cheeked curly haired person.

‘The name’s Vibhishan. I’m a lawyer in Lord Dashanan’s court. I have travelled a great deal on this path.’

‘And his brother,’ Sugreev added and hissed. ‘What do you want, man?’

Laxman was surprised Dashanan’s own brother was here. But he had heard about him — there was a huge difference between Dashanan and him. While Vibhishan believed in democratic monarchy, Dashanan believed in absolute dictatorship and there was a war of ideological differences.

‘I come here to help you, so you could win this war quickly.’

‘Why do you want us to win?’ Raghav asked. ‘You could be lying to us.’

‘Lady Sita is alive,’ he said, as everyone began to smile and celebrate hearing it even though Laxman wasn’t convinced it was true. ‘Meghnad had tricked you. Your purpose to fight still exists.’

Laxman crossed his arms, even though his elbows hurt. ‘Why are you telling this to us?’

‘Because I want him dead, just like you do. He’s a hindrance to killing my brother. My brother has caused a great deal of pain to many people here. And I am one of the few in the court who want him dead,’ he said, smiling. ‘I know how to pluck that hindrance away. I mean, I recently got to know. And if you don’t believe me, you can spy on that place for a few days to see I am not lying.’

‘Which place? What are you talking about?’ Laxman asked.

‘Nikumbila Hills,’ Vibhishan said. ‘Meghnad was supposed to die the day Bajrang lit the court on fire. But he gets his energy serum from a temple in the hills. If you stop him from getting it, he won’t be able to fight.’

Laxman arched his brows. This was interesting. ‘Where is it?’

Vibhishan chuckled, as he walked past them and sat close to the fire, where they all were initially sitting, warming his palms. ‘I will only tell in detail if Sugreev and Raghav sign a decree that I shall be the new king of Lanka once Dashanan is toppled.’

So, this was his plan. A coup d’état.

Laxman, Raghav and Sugreev shared a deep glance and Laxman expected they would think more about it, but in haste, Raghav responded: ‘All right, we shall.’

Vibhishan slapped his hand together cheekily. ‘Amazing!’

‘How can we trust him? Is he even reliable?’ Laxman asked, sitting opposite Vibhishan.

The lawyer shrugged. ‘You have no choice. After all, my dear allies, this information has come from the man who was there when he got the serum. Kumbhkaran.’

55. Meghnad

I am dead.

Meghnad opened his eyes, feeling weak as ever. He was bandaged and a strong ointment smell was wrapped around his body. The Ayurvedic creams were applied all over. He strained his eyes and he realized he was in the infirmary of his camp.

How did I get here?

The nurses began to check on him, his pulse, and his heartbeat and he could see the sun was up and the shadows of familiar figures appearing — Atikaya and Kumbhkaran.

Atikaya looked irritated; almost as if he despised Meghnad, but he didn't care for Atikaya. His brother didn't know the gravity of the situation here.

As Meghnad tried to get up, a searing pain pierced his head. He began to press it when Atikaya retorted, 'What happened back there? Why didn't you blow them up?'

Meghnad stayed silent and he shared a glance with Kumbhkaran, as if hoping that he would understand.

'I had to save your ass, brother,' Atikaya shook his head, gritting his teeth. 'I came down to check on you. Thank god you hit the canopy first and then the ground, otherwise the impact would have killed you. In fact, hell, I don't even know how you survived this.'

Kali's Blood …

'But anyway, I'm going to check up on the frontier,' Atikaya spat, before leaving.

'How is Prameela? Where is she?' he asked, eyes frantically searching for her, as if she would know he was here.

'She's with Dashanan, back at the palace.'

As instructed by Meghnad. But then why were they at the palace?

To check on Sita, of course, making sure the statement is true, what Meenakshi has done till now. It could be that.

'Meenakshi died,' Kumbhkaran quietly added. 'I don't know the details yet.

But the nurses said that Prameela called them and she was stabbed. What is going on, kid?' He was flaring his nostrils.

Meghnad could understand his uncle's frustration. First, it was Khara Uncle who died, then Akshaya, and now Aunt Meenakshi. It was all chaos.

'I'll tell you,' Meghnad calmly breathed.

Kumbhkaran sat next to the bed, as he looked out and then back at Meghnad, who was frail like an old man. 'What happened back there on the battlefield?'

'I will tell you,' Meghnad nodded to himself as he said the same thing again, feeling too weak to even explain the entire situation. He shivered as he continued: 'But I think …' he coughed. There was fire inside his body that burnt strongly. 'I think I need it again. Otherwise, I don't think I'll live long.'

Kumbhkaran patted him on his hands. 'I'll get the chariot.'

*

While the chariot took time to reach the Nikumbila Hills, Meghnad slowly with all the power he had left in his lungs and his body, started telling Kumbhkaran everything — from the beginning, starting with the stint with Vidhyut since Kumbhkaran was in his retreat during that time. He told how Prameela got to know everything and how Meenakshi had plotted the entire thing.

And by the time Meghnad had finished the story, they had reached the temple. The Kali's Blood had worn off and he realised what Pracheta was talking about — the withdrawal was bad. If the serum could make him feel young and alive and the strongest person out there, he could also feel the worst without it.

'I need to tell you something,' Kumbhkaran hastily added. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know.'

Meghnad didn't hear most of it, as he got off from the chariot, his feet weak and his arm around Kumbhkaran's waist as he began to stagger towards the temple. 'What did you do?' He asked his uncle who helped Meghnad reach the temple.

'I told Meenakshi about Kali's Blood,' Kumbhkaran said. 'She asked me how you were alive after that fire outbreak and she seemed so concerned. I didn't know she was plotting against the empire.'

Meghnad chuckled when they heard it. Footsteps. Meghnad and Kumbhkaran turned to see — coming out of the forests, a dozen men at the forefront with none other than Laxman and Raghav. Up close, they looked broken too but not as much as Meghnad.

Now he understood.

I will have the last laugh.

And she did.

Meghnad spoke to his uncle, ‘Protect me while I do the yagna.’

Kumbhkaran nodded, pulling out his blade and standing between them. Meghnad dragged his feet and his body, when he saw the gates in front. He could hear in the background, the fights, the clashes and the sounds. He could hear Kumbhkaran was winning and why wouldn’t he? He was of a daunting size.

Meghnad reached the gates where he saw there stood no guards outside that day. He unsheathed his sword, when he turned his head and saw the scene playing —

Kumbhkaran had killed most of the Vanars and he was in a sword duel with Laxman. They were having a fierce fight and Raghav, meanwhile had his bow and arrow, tightly strung as he shot it at Kumbhkaran, the arrowhead piercing through his head. Heaps of blood poured out as his dear uncle fell on the ground, without even flinching twice.

I can’t leave this.

Meghnad held on to his sword and grabbed it hard, with tears trickling down his cheeks. Kumbhkaran, the only man he actually respected and looked up to other than his father, was dead and in the most horrible way possible.

Laxman came forward with the sword and he looked like a fair-skinned barbarian. Instantly, he clashed against Meghnad’s sword and began to push him.

Why?

Meghnad realised he was trying to push him through the door so his yagna couldn’t be complete and he would remain weak.

With his feet dug on the ground, Meghnad resisted. They both pushed their blades against each other, trying and hoping to dominate the other. But it was getting difficult for Meghnad, for he had no energy left.

Meghnad saw his feet.

They were close to the outskirts of the temple.

Come on.

‘I’m sorry. It was all a misunderstanding,’ Meghnad said, as he felt the saltiness on his face, the stickiness from his tears.

Laxman responded. ‘It’s too late for apologies.’

Meghnad closed his eyes, as he realised he had no strength. He let go and Laxman pushed him beyond the gate. Meghnad’s weapon was in his hand, as he fell back on the floor of the temple, the clattering sound of the blade ran across the ground.

There was silence and Meghnad knew Laxman was about to stab him when …

‘Lakhan!’ Raghav exclaimed.

Laxman turned back. ‘What happened, brother?’

‘We do not kill those who are already dead.’

Meghnad could see the pitying eyes of Laxman over him and that was the last thing he wanted to be seen as.

‘But brother, what if he returns?’

‘Then we will fight him again, Lakhan. But we can’t kill him like this. Look at him.’

And Laxman did.

Meghnad gritted his teeth. He wanted to say spiteful things, he wanted to get hold of his body, but he was unable to do so.

‘And …’ Raghav began, ‘… Vibhishan told us, didn’t he? That weapons aren’t allowed inside. He can’t get the Kali’s Blood, so it is impossible for him to return. He’s just dying … slowly.’

‘Suits him right,’ Laxman sheathed his sword and began to walk away.

And the words had died down.

So did he.

And before he could accept his death and be done with it, he heard the sound of footsteps coming from inside the temple.

‘Meghnad, Meghnad,’ the voices were faint, when they got hold of him and he could see many priests blinking over his frail body and the sword that was inside.

‘He brought it here.’ One of them said.

And the other one, who was Pracheta, the only one Meghnad recognized, said: ‘Yes, he did. I saw it. But he’s dying. We need to help him.’

‘We aren’t doing a charity here for every dying person. The rules are simple. No weapons and a full yagna.’ The other priest contested.

‘But let us at least give him Soma,’ Pracheta said, rather curtly. ‘He won’t be given the Kali’s Blood. It’s all right.’

The priests discussed amongst them and then one of them brought the blue liquid in a small wooden bowl which Meghnad noticed was Soma. He had never taken it but rather just played around with it, to create weapons. Rakshasas weren’t allowed Somas, for they would make them mad and spiral their thoughts out of control. But they were also high potent medical liquid.

Pracheta made him drink it and Meghnad without protesting sipped it all, his tongue feeling the dryness leave his body. His body began to shiver and his mind began to move from one place to another, as images of all his crimes came to his mind and what he had done, who he was and he realized …

He didn’t deserve redemption for what he had committed till now.

He deserved death.

56. Meghnad

He was ready.

He felt better. In fact, he felt alive.

But he knew this was just a temporary feeling. Kali’s Blood would still be needed and he would have to come the next day to take it since today was ruined by the use of the weapon inside the temple.

He stood opposite the statue of Goddess Kali and just stared at it and the fire that burnt close to her. Pracheta walked up to him, as he patted Meghnad on the back.

Meghnad smiled. ‘I wronged you and yet you saved me. Why?’

Pracheta shrugged.

Meghnad didn’t know why he did it, perhaps out of humanity or perhaps he felt sad for him, but Meghnad was just grateful and he touched the priest’s feet. But before leaving, he knelt down and did the yagna. He used one of his rings as an offering in the fire and then chanted and prayed to Goddess Kali for what he was going to do next —

He was going to stop this war.

He kissed the ground and then he came on his feet when he noticed Pracheta was intently watching him. ‘Why did you do it? You did know that you won’t be getting the serum today since you broke one rule of the two?’

Meghnad smiled. ‘I didn’t do it for the serum. I did it for myself.’ And he had begun believing in the power of Goddess Kali for she brought Pracheta to save his life and gave him another chance.

As he walked outside to his abandoned chariot, he saw Kumbhkaran’s body had vanished. He felt an utter pang of sadness that just hit him in the gut, and Pracheta said when he noticed it: ‘We have sent it back to the city for a proper royal funeral. Erm, there was so much blood and so much of it being shed in the name of I don’t know what.’

Meghnad didn’t know too. He sat on the chariot, and grabbed the reins. And he looked at Pracheta, who was smiling at Meghnad. ‘You asked me,’ the old priest began, ‘why I saved you.’

Meghnad nodded, waiting for the answer.

‘You should have asked, why I told you about Kali’s Blood …’ he said. ‘… in the first place. I was called foolish by my peers, but do you know why I did it? Because I saw something in you. You were evil, but there was no doubt that you had the capability of transforming into a good person. Remember, Lord Indrajit, a man can commit sins but if he has the heart to leave his path of wickedness, he can achieve salvation.’

Meghnad knew that he would keep this saying to his heart. ‘Guruji, it’s not Indrajit.’ He smiled, as he realised that name came with the blood of the many he had sacrificed. ‘It’s just Meghnad.’

57. Meghnad

He had reached the palace.

And he could see the number of guards were less around here, for many had joined the war, in the outskirts of Lankapuri.

Meghnad walked upstairs with his head high, as he decided to confront his father. He managed to come to the first floor and strolled towards his father's study. He didn't knock on it. In fact, he opened it without thinking twice and he saw his father was wearing his pearl necklace. He had his battle armour on him, and even the sword was sheathed, but he was having a hard time wearing the necklace.

Dashanan didn't say anything, as if he had anticipated Meghnad. 'Will you?'

Meghnad nodded, walking up to his father and helping him wear it, by tying the knot and grappling with the hook. 'I hope you know why I'm here.'

'What your lady love wants — to stop the war,' Dashanan said, as he stepped back and turned to face Meghnad, squaring next to him.

Meghnad could see how much their faces looked alike. It was only the difference of their beards. 'You know why she wants it.'

'I know. She told me. I got it vetted by Sita too.' He nodded to himself, leaning on the table.

'So? Why aren't we pulling back our armies?'

'My dear son,' Dashanan said, scoffing, 'it's no more about Sita. Don't you understand? We don't fight for her. Me and that Manav. He thinks he fights to get her, but it's not that. Since the beginning, it was about power. I stole his power. He wants his power back. And now I will do anything to preserve that power.'

Meghnad clenched his fists. 'But you are hurting Sita.'

'How does it matter? She's a woman,' he laughed. 'Why do you care? In fact, once this is over, I'll marry her. I'm glad she's not my daughter. She was giving me illicit thoughts.'

Meghnad felt disgusted. And he didn't know why. He had bedded several women who were married too, but now … all of this felt so wrong.

‘But we are losing. Meenakshi has died.’

‘Good riddance!’ exclaimed Dashanan. ‘That woman was an abomination to this family. Do you know who started that name? Suparnika? Do you know who was it?’ And then he pointed back at himself. ‘She deserved that, that treacherous skunk.’

‘And Kumbhkaran too …’

Dashanan arched his brows when Meghnad began to tell what had happened back in Nikumbila Hills. He listened carefully before smacking his fists on the table. ‘That bloody Manav! He thinks he can get away by claiming the lives of my family members.’ Meghnad could see that Dashanan was not sad, but rather afraid he might lose, but then he looked up and smiled at his son, as he embraced him.

Meghnad didn’t.

‘I still have you, son. With you on my side, we can win anything. Your mind works in the best of manners.’ He patted Meghnad on the shoulder. ‘What’s wrong?’

He sighed, and he didn’t have to think this through before saying curtly: ‘I won’t fight for you anymore, Father.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s not right.’

‘It doesn’t matter what’s right. You follow me. You have always followed me.’

Meghnad shook his head. ‘Not anymore,’ he paused. ‘If you won’t stop this war, then I won’t fight it. If you do, I will support you.’

‘And let that Manav vermin take what is ours!’ He yelled.

‘Lady Sita is not some object that you have. She’s a woman,’ Meghnad said. ‘And a wife, who you have abducted.’

‘It’s so sad and disappointing to see you like this. Standing up against your father who made you who you are,’ Dashanan said. ‘But it’s all right, if you won’t fight for me, it’s fine, I get it. I can’t force you, son.’

Meghnad was taken aback. *Has he agreed to not let me be a part of the war?*

‘But then I just …’ Dashanan walked over his chair, sitting down, as he pursed his lips and shrugged. ‘I just worry about, you know, Prameela.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘And you, my son, should worry about her too,’ he said, flaring his nostrils, as he gazed with searing, lethal eyes.

‘You won’t,’ he was gritting his teeth.

‘She won’t be the first woman I’ve killed,’ he leaned back and a placid smile spread across his face, expressionless and deadly. ‘And if you are a part of this

war, I won’t lay a hand on her. I promise. But if you aren’t … I have no choice then.’

Meghnad realised he was in a fix here. He knew if he didn’t go to war, there will be a constant worry that Dashanan will come one day to complete what he had threatened. Meghnad could run away but Dashanan would catch him and he would get hold of Prameela, one way or the other.

And if he did go out on the battlefield, he would be going against what he stood for.

And he could only see one way out of it.

To surrender in the battlefield.

58. Prameela

Dashanan had said that he would free her and he would stop the war. And she was glad that she had a father-in-law like him, who would care for the needs of the woman.

I don't know why people made him into such a monster.

She was walking inside her room, with a smile on her face, when she saw the door open and a familiar face entered.

It was Meghnad.

He looked exhausted and worried and something was off about him. He came close and hugged her. Then he went to the trunk he owned and opened it. He took his armor out. He wore the shining, gold breastplate with a red orb in between. He didn't speak a word, as he was wearing it, so Prameela said it herself: 'I hope you talked to your father. He has agreed to pull back his armies,' she smiled. 'He will be going this week to form a treaty,' she was exuberant.

Meghnad looked at her, as he tied his breastplate on his chest and when Prameela tried to help him, he refused.

'Are you okay?'

'I am, yes,' Meghnad said. 'Be safe, okay?'

'What happened to you? You look in bad shape.'

'I'm okay.'

Prameela arched her brows. His skin was pale, and he didn't look too well. Did he have the serum? And she wanted to ask, but instead refrained. 'Will you return?'

He nodded.

'Promise me?' she asked, because whenever he did promise, he would try his best to keep it.

And to that, Meghnad looked directly at her with no emotions, as he clasped her cheeks and took it in his hands. 'I wished, we could have married, properly.'

'I wish that too. But we said we would after the war.'

'What if I don't return?'

'You will. You can't die because you have Kali's Blood in your veins.'

Meghnad smiled, as if he knew she would say it.

There's something wrong with him.

And then he kissed her on the forehead, saying softly in her ears: 'Stay close to Lady Sita. Raghav will come, no matter what, to save her.'

'What do you mean?'

But Meghnad had by then walked to the door, and as he partially closed it behind him, he looked at her again, as if he was stealing one last glance of her … one last time.

Prameela swallowed a lump in her throat, as she waved her hand at him, nervously. 'You didn't promise.'

Meghnad had teary eyes, as he said before leaving: 'I know.'

EPILOGUE

Laxman

Why?

Why was he surrendering?

Laxman looked at the man himself, kneeling in the front and he wanted to ask this question to him, but for some reason, he could feel his emotions inside, as if he knew deep down — as if he understood what it was.

‘I can’t live,’ Meghnad began as if breaking the silence while the red dust spiralled across them, bodies piling up; the sounds of the blades clattering the skies. ‘For the sake of Prameela and for the sake of Lady Sita.’

‘Why?’ Laxman finally asked, as if he needed strength to ask him this.

‘As long as I live, my father will win. To defeat him, you need to kill me. But promise me, you will save my love, Prameela. You will protect her.’

Laxman nodded. ‘What else?’

‘And tell everyone you killed me in self-defense. That I struck you first. That I didn’t surrender till my last breath. My father should know I died fighting for him otherwise Prameela would be in danger. Please, I beg of you,’ Meghnad said, as tears brimmed in his eyes.

Laxman saw that the Vanars around him were winning and good was prevailing over bad. But perhaps, the bad, the evil in the battle wasn’t exactly black, but they had some good in them as well.

Perhaps Raghav was right.

He brought the sword close to Meghnad’s throat, as Meghnad closed his eyes.

And for the first time, Laxman felt sad for killing a Tribal.

He is a Rakshas. Why do I pity him?

And then with a quick slash, Laxman closed his eyes, separating the Rakshas prince’s head. Meghnad’s head toppled off as the body fell back, collapsing on the ground.

Laxman opened his eyes to see it and he couldn’t believe that Meghnad was

dead. And as his eyes scanned the environment, he looked over the red landscape as the Vanars rejoiced over the corpses of the Rakshasas that they had killed. His eyes met Raghav's who stood a few yards away. He just nodded and winked at him. He saw Sugreev, a Tribal, a coward now turned a warrior, a friend.

And he saw Bajrang with his greasy white fur and the bloody mace.

'INDRAJIT IS DEAD!' One of the Vanar soldiers shouted.

And another screamed.

And so did others.

'INDRAJIT IS NO MORE!'

And everyone shouted and chanted his name: 'INDRAJIT IS DEAD!'

Sugreev came forward, 'We are going to win this, man.'

Laxman saw Raghav coming towards him and he patted Laxman on the shoulder. 'What did he say to you, Lakhan?'

And Laxman had never lied to his brother, but for some reason, deep down, he knew he had to keep a promise to a warrior he once used to look down upon. But not anymore. Amidst the rising chants, his respect for the slain warrior had risen.

'Well,' Laxman smiled, as he saw the bright horizon in front, where the sun rose and its rays brushed over his skin. 'He put up a tough fight, brother. In the end, he asked me to acknowledge him by his true name …'

'Which is?' Raghav's eyes quavered.

'Meghnad … just Meghnad.'

First published in India by Simon & Schuster India, 2019
A CBS company

Copyright © Kevin Missal, 2019

The right of Kevin Missal to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 57 of the Copyright Act, 1957.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster India
818, Indraprakash Building,
21, Barakhamba Road,
New Delhi 110001

www.simonandschuster.co.in

PB ISBN: 978-93-86797-73-5
eBook ISBN: 978-93-86797-74-2

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, places, events and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

Typeset in India by SÜRYA, New Delhi
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd.

Simon & Schuster India is committed to sourcing paper that is made from wood grown in sustainable forests and support the Forest Stewardship Council, the leading international forest certification organisation. Our books displaying the FSC logo are printed on FSC certified paper.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.